

Interzone

MEMORIES OF THE SPACE AGE

J.G. BALLARD

A FAREWELL TO PHILIP DICK

THOMAS M. DISCH

ANGEL BABY

RACHEL POLLACK



Interzone

EDITORIAL

The initial response to *Interzone* has been good – positively eager in many quarters – which justifies our claim in the last issue that a magazine such as this is necessary. Particularly encouraging are the hundreds of unsolicited stories we have received from hopeful young writers. It is a marvellous thing that so many people wish to write, an auspicious sign for the future of literature (Marshall McLuhan was very premature back in the 1960s when he foresaw the death of the written word). It is especially gratifying to us that such a large number of new writers are drawn to “science fiction”. I put that term in quotes because it is inadequate to describe the range of imaginative works which we have been receiving. Yet science fiction is at the heart of our enterprise; it seems the natural mode for young writers today – members of a generation which has grown up not only with the works of Clarke and Aldiss and Moorcock but with TV shows such as *Dr Who* and *Star Trek* and above all with the fact of a world of telecommunications and space technology. It seems we live in a time when only science fiction, or some variant thereof, will do.

Naturally, the submissions vary greatly in quality (and the tales of spaceship battles and futuristic Kung Fu are not to our taste) but a sufficiently high proportion has been of such a promising standard that we feel enormously encouraged in our endeavours. Now we know that the writers are out there, hungry for a market, and *Interzone* has indeed got a place to fill in the world. The sheer pressure of quantity inevitably means that the majority of those who submit stories will be disappointed. A magazine of 32 pages, appearing quarterly, can only publish so much. But we are happy to see the submissions continue to flow; we attempt to judge everything on its merits, and are confident that we will find jewels. Most new writers need to learn certain professional skills, and we feel that the best way for them to do so is by interaction with a magazine and its editors. Which makes it all the more vital that *Interzone* should prosper. In time, if we can expand our sales, we shall increase our page-count and accommodate more stories by talented novice writers. Meanwhile you (as readers and potential writers) can help by making the magazine known

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J.G. Ballard

Memories of the Space Age



I

All day this strange pilot had flown his antique aeroplane over the abandoned space centre, a frantic machine lost in the silence of Florida. The flapping engine of the old Curtiss biplane woke Dr Mallory soon after dawn, as he lay asleep beside his exhausted wife on the fifth floor of the empty hotel in Titusville. Dreams of the space age had filled the night, memories of white runways as calm as glaciers, now broken by this eccentric aircraft veering around like the fragment of a disturbed mind.

From his balcony Mallory watched the ancient biplane circle the rusty gantries of Cape Kennedy. The sunlight flared against the pilot's helmet, illuminating the cat's cradle of silver wires that pinioned the open fuselage between the wings, a puzzle from which the pilot was trying to escape by a series of loops and rolls. Ignoring him, the plane flew back and forth above the forest canopy, its engine calling across the immense deserted decks, as if this ghost of the pioneer days of aviation could summon the sleeping titans of the Apollo programme from their graves beneath the cracked concrete.

Giving up for the moment, the Curtiss turned from the gantries and set course inland for Titusville. As it clattered over the hotel Mallory recognised the familiar hard stare behind the pilot's goggles. Each morning the same pilot appeared, flying a succession of antique craft – relics, Mallory assumed, from some forgotten museum at a private airfield nearby. There were a Spad and a Sopwith Camel, a replica of the Wright Flyer, and a Fokker triplane that had buzzed the NASA causeway the previous day, driving inland thousands of frantic gulls and swallows, denying them any share of the sky.

Standing naked on the balcony, Mallory let the amber air warm his skin. He counted the ribs below his shoulder blades, aware that for the first time he could feel his kidneys. Despite the hours spent for-

ging each day, and the canned food looted from the abandoned supermarkets, it was difficult to keep up his body weight. In the two months since they set out from Vancouver on the slow, nervous drive back to Florida, he and Anne had each lost more than thirty pounds, as if their bodies were carrying out a re-inventory of themselves for the coming world without time. But the bones endured. His skeleton seemed to grow stronger and heavier, preparing itself for the unnourished sleep of the grave.

Already sweating in the humid air, Mallory returned to the bedroom. Anne had woken, but lay motionless in the centre of the bed, strands of blonde hair caught like a child's in her mouth. With its fixed and empty expression, her face resembled a clock that had just stopped. Mallory sat down and placed his hands on her diaphragm, gently respiring her. Every morning he feared that time would run out for Anne while she slept, leaving her forever in the middle of a nightmare.

She stared at Mallory, as if surprised to wake in this shabby resort hotel with a man she had possibly known for years but for some reason failed to recognise.

"Hinton?"

"Not yet," Mallory steered the hair from her mouth. "Do I look like him now?"

"God, I'm going blind." Anne wiped her nose on the pillow. She raised her wrists, and stared at the two watches that formed a pair of time-cuffs. The stores in Florida were filled with clocks and watches that had been left behind in case they might be contaminated, and each day Anne selected a new set of timepieces. She touched Mallory reassuringly. "All men look the same, Edward. That's streetwalker's wisdom for you. But I meant the plane."

"I'm not sure. It wasn't a spotter aircraft. Clearly the police don't bother to come to Cape Kennedy any more."

"I don't blame them. It's an evil place. Edward, we ought to leave, let's get out this morning."

Mallory held her shoulders, trying to calm this frayed but still handsome woman. He needed her to look her best for Hinton. "Anne, we've only been here a week - let's give it a little more time."

"Time? Edward..." She took Mallory's hands in a sudden show of affection. "Dear, that's one thing we've run out of. I'm getting those headaches again, just like the ones I had fifteen years ago. It's uncanny, I can feel the same nerves..."

"I'll give you something, you can sleep this afternoon."

"No... They're a warning. I want to feel every twinge." She pressed the wrist-watches to her temples, as if trying to tune her brain to their signal. "We were mad to come here, and even more mad to stay for a second longer than we need."

"I know. It's a long shot but worth a try. I've learned one thing in all these years - if there's a way out, we'll find it at Cape Kennedy."

"We won't! Everything's poisoned here. We should go to Australia, like all the other NASA people." Anne rooted in her handbag on the floor, heaving aside an illustrated encyclopaedia of birds she had found in a Titusville bookstore. "I looked it up - western Australia is as far from Florida as you can go. It's almost the exact antipodes. Edward, my sister lives in Perth. I knew there was a reason why she invited us there."

Mallory stared at the distant gantries of Cape Kennedy. It was difficult to believe that he had once worked there. "I don't think even Perth, Australia, is far enough. We need to set out into space again..."

Anne shuddered. "Edward, don't say that - a crime was committed here, everyone knows that's how it all began." As they listened to the distant drone of the aircraft she gazed at her broad hips and soft thighs. Equal to the challenge, her chin lifted. "Noisy, isn't it? Do you think Hinton is here? He may not remember me."

"He'll remember you. You were the only one who liked him."

"Well, in a sort of way. How long was he in prison before he escaped? Twenty years?"

"A long time. Perhaps he'll take you flying again. You enjoyed that."

"Yes... He was strange. But even if he is here, can he help? He was the one who started it all."

"No, not Hinton." Mallory listened to his voice in the empty hotel. It seemed deeper and more resonant, as the slowing time stretched out the frequencies. "In point of fact, I started it all."

Anne had turned from him and lay on her side, a watch pressed to each ear. Mallory reminded himself to go out and begin his morning search for food. Food, a vitamin shot, and a clean pair of sheets. Sex with Anne, which he had hoped would keep them bickering and awake, had generated affection instead. Suppose they conceived a child, here at Cape Kennedy, within the shadow of the gantries...?

He remembered the mongol and autistic children he had left behind at the clinic in Vancouver, and his firm belief - strongly contested by his fellow physicians and the worn-out parents - that these were diseases of time, malfunctions of the temporal sense that marooned these children on small islands of

awareness, a few minutes in the case of the mongols, a span of micro-seconds for the autistics. A child conceived and born here at Cape Kennedy would be born into a world without time, an indefinite and unending present, that primeval paradise that the old brain remembered so vividly, seen both by those living for the first time and by those dying for the first time. It was curious that images of heaven or paradise always presented a static world, not the kinetic eternity one would expect, the roller-coaster of a hyperactive funfair, the screaming Luna Parks of LSD and psilocybin. It was a strange paradox that given eternity, an infinity of time, they chose to eliminate the very element offered in such abundance.

Still, if they stayed much longer at Cape Kennedy he and Anne would soon return to the world of the old brain, like those first tragic astronauts he had helped to put into space. During the previous year in Vancouver there had been too many attacks, those periods of largo when time seemed to slow, an afternoon at his desk stretched into days. His own lapses in concentration both he and his colleagues put down to eccentricity, but Anne's growing vagueness had been impossible to ignore, the first clear signs of the space sickness that began to slow the clock, as it had done first for the astronauts and then for all the other NASA personnel based in Florida. Within the last months the attacks had come five or six times a day, periods when everything began to slow down, he would apparently spend all day shaving or signing a cheque.

Time, like a film reel running through a faulty projector, was moving at an erratic pace, at moments backing up and almost coming to a halt, then speeding on again. One day soon it would stop, freeze forever on one frame. Had it really taken them two months to drive from Vancouver, weeks alone from Jacksonville to Cape Kennedy?

He thought of the long journey down the Florida coast, a world of immense empty hotels and glutinous time, of strange meetings with Anne in deserted corridors, of sex-acts that seemed to last for days. Now and then, in forgotten bedrooms, they came across other couples who had strayed into Florida, into the eternal present of this timeless zone, Paolo and Francesca forever embracing in the Fontainebleau Hotel. In some of those eyes there had been horror...

As for Anne and himself, time had run out of their marriage fifteen years ago, driven away by the spectres of the space complex, and by memories of Hinton. They had come back here like Adam and Eve returning to the Edenic paradise with an unfortunate does of VD. Thankfully, as time evaporated, so did memory. He looked at his few possessions, now almost meaningless - the tape machine on which he recorded his steady decline; an album of nude Polaroid poses of a woman doctor he had known in Vancouver; his Gray's Anatomy from his student days, a unique work of fiction, pages still stained with formalin from the dissecting-room cadavers; a paperback selection of Muybridge's stop-frame photographs; and a psychoanalytic study of Simon Magus.

"Anne...?" The light in the bedroom had become brighter, there was a curious glare, like the white runways of his dreams. Nothing moved, for a moment Mallory felt that they were waxworks in a museum tableau, or in a painting by Edward Hopper of a tired

couple in a provincial hotel. The dream-time was creeping up on him, about to enfold him. As always he felt no fear, his pulse was calmer....

There was a blare of noise outside, a shadow flashed across the balcony. The Curtiss biplane roared overhead, then sped low across the rooftops of Titusville. Roused by the sudden movement, Mallory stood up and shook himself, slapping his thighs to spur on his heart. The plane had caught him just in time.

"Anne, I think that was Hinton..."

She lay on her side, the watches to her ears. Mallory stroked her cheeks, but her eyes rolled away from him. She breathed peacefully with her upper lungs, her pulse as slow as a hibernating mammal's. He drew the sheet across her shoulders. She would wake in an hour's time, with a vivid memory of a single image, a rehearsal for those last seconds before time finally froze...

II

Medical case in hand, Mallory stepped into the street through the broken plate-glass window of the supermarket. The abandoned store had become his chief source of supplies. Tall palms split the sidewalks in front of the boarded-up shops and bars, providing a shaded promenade through the empty town. Several times he had been caught out in the open during an attack, but the palms had shielded his skin from the Florida sun. For a reason he had yet to understand, he liked to walk naked through the silent streets, watched by the orioles and parakeets. The naked doctor, physician to the birds...perhaps they would pay him in feathers, the midnight-blue tail-plumes of the macaws, the golden wings of the orioles, sufficient fees for him to build a flying machine of his own?

The medical case was heavy, loaded with packet rice, sugar, cartons of pasta. He would light a small fire on another balcony and cook up a starchy meal, carefully boiling the brackish water in the roof tank. Mallory paused in the hotel car-park, gathering his strength for the climb to the fifth floor, above the rat and cockroach line. He rested in the front seat of the police patrol car they had commandeered in a deserted suburb of Jacksonville. Anne had regretted leaving behind her classy Toyota, but the exchange had been sensible. Not only would the unexpected sight of this squad car confuse any military spotter planes, but the hotted-up Dodge could outrun most light aircraft.

Mallory was relying on the car's power to trap the mysterious pilot who appeared each morning in his antique aeroplanes. He had noticed that as every day passed these veteran machines tended to be of increasingly older vintage. Sooner or later the pilot would find himself well within Mallory's reach, unable to shake off the pursuing Dodge before being forced to land at his secret airfield.

Mallory listed to the police radio, the tuneless static that reflected the huge void that lay over Florida. By contrast the air-traffic frequencies were a babel of intercom chatter, both from the big jets landing at Mobile, Atlanta and Savannah, and from military craft overflying the Bahamas. All gave Florida a wide berth. To the north of the 31st parallel life in the United States went on as before, but south of that unfenced

and rarely patrolled frontier was an immense silence of deserted marinas and shopping malls, abandoned citrus farms and retirement estates, silent ghettos and airports.

Losing interest in Mallory, the birds were rising into the air. A dappled shadow crossed the car-park, and Mallory looked up as a graceful, slender-winged aircraft drifted lazily past the roof of the hotel. Its twin-bladed propeller struck the air like a child's paddle, driven at a leisurely pace by the pilot sitting astride the bicycle pedals within the transparent fuselage. A man-powered glider of advanced design, it soared silently above the rooftops, buoyed by the thermals rising from the empty town.

"Hinton!" Certain now that he could catch the former astronaut, Mallory abandoned his groceries and pulled himself behind the wheel of the police car. By the time he started the flooded engine he had lost sight of the glider. Its delicate wings, almost as long as an airliner's, had drifted across the forest canopy, kept company by the flocks of swallows and martins that rose to inspect this timorous intruder of their air-space. Mallory reversed out of the car-park and set off after the glider, veering in and out of the palms that lifted from the centre of the street.

Calming himself, he scanned the side roads, and caught sight of the machine circling the jai alai stadium on the southern outskirts of the town. A cloud of gulls surrounded the glider, some mobbing its lazy propeller, others taking up their station above its wing-tips. The pilot seemed to be urging them to follow him, enticing them with gentle rolls and yaws, drawing them back towards the sea and to the forest causeways of the space complex.

Reducing his speed, Mallory followed three hundred yards behind the glider. They crossed the bridge over the Banana River, heading towards the NASA causeway and the derelict bars and motels of Cocoa Beach. The nearest of the ganties was still over a mile away to the north, but Mallory was aware that he had entered the outer zone of the space grounds. A threatening aura emanated from these ancient towers, as old in their way as the great temple columns of Karnak, bearers of a different cosmic order, symbols of a view of the universe that had been abandoned along with the state of Florida that had given them birth.

Looking down at the now clear waters of the Banana River, Mallory found himself avoiding the sombre forests that packed the causeways and concrete decks of the space complex, smothering the signs and fences, the camera towers and observation bunkers. Time was different here, as it had been at Alamogordo and Eniwetok, a psychic fissure had riven both time and space, then run deep into the minds of the people who worked here. Through that new suture in his skull time leaked into the slack water below the car. The forest oaks were waiting for him to feed their roots, these motionless trees were as insane as anything in the visions of Max Ernst. There were the same insatiable birds, feeding on the vegetation that sprang from the corpses of trapped aircraft...

Above the causeway the gulls were wheeling in alarm, screaming against the sky. The powered glider side-slipped out of the air, circled and soared along the bridge, its miniature undercarriage only ten feet

above the police car. The pilot pedalled rapidly, propeller flashing at the alarmed sun, and Mallory caught a glimpse of blonde hair and a woman's face in the transparent cockpit. A red silk scarf flew from her throat.

"Hinton!" As Mallory shouted into the noisy air the pilot leaned from the cockpit and pointed to a slip road running through the forest towards Cocoa Beach, then banked behind the trees and vanished.

Hinton? For some bizarre reason the former astronaut was now masquerading as a woman in a blonde wig, luring him back to the space complex. The birds had been in league with him...

The sky was empty, the gulls had vanished across the river into the forest. Mallory stopped the car. He was about to step onto the road when he heard the drone of an aero-engine. The Fokker triplane had emerged from the space centre. It made a tight circuit of the gantries and came in across the sea. Fifty feet above the beach, it swept across the palmettos and saw-grass, its twin machine-guns pointing straight towards the police car.

Mallory began to re-start the engine, when the machine-guns above the pilot's windshield opened fire at him. He assumed that the pilot was shooting blank ammunition left over from some air display. Then the first bullets struck the metalled road a hundred feet ahead. The second burst threw the car onto its flattened front tyres, severed the door pillar by the passenger seat and filled the cabin with exploding glass. As the plane climbed steeply, about to make its second pass at him, Mallory brushed the blood-flecked glass from his chest and thighs. He leapt from the car and vaulted over the metal railing into the shallow culvert beside the bridge, as his blood ran away through the water towards the waiting forest of the space grounds.

III

From the shelter of the culvert, Mallory watched the police car burning on the bridge. The column of oily smoke rose a thousand feet into the empty sky, a beacon visible for ten miles around the Cape. The flocks of gulls had vanished. The powered glider and its woman pilot — he remembered her warning him of the Fokker's approach — had slipped away to its lair somewhere south along the coast.

Too stunned to rest, Mallory stared at the mile-long causeway. It would take him half an hour to walk back to the mainland, an easy target for Hinton as he waited in the Fokker above the clouds. Had the former astronaut recognised Mallory and immediately guessed why the sometime NASA physician had come to search for him?

Too exhausted to swim the Banana River, Mallory waded ashore and set off through the trees. He decided to spend the afternoon in one of the abandoned motels in Cocoa Beach, then make his way back to Titusville after dark.

The forest floor was cool against his bare feet, but a soft light fell through the forest canopy and warmed his skin. Already the blood had dried on his chest and shoulders, a vivid tracery like an aboriginal tattoo that seemed more suitable wear for this violent and uncertain realm than the clothes he had left behind at

the hotel. He passed the rusting hulk of an Airstream trailer, its steel capsule overgrown with lianas and ground ivy, as if the trees had reached up to seize a passing space craft and dragged it down into the undergrowth. There were abandoned cars and the remains of camping equipment, moss-covered chairs and tables around old barbecue spits left here twenty years earlier when the sightseers had hurriedly vacated the state.

Mallory stepped through this terminal moraine, the elements of a forgotten theme park arranged by a demolition squad. Already he felt that he belonged to an older world within the forest, a realm of darkness, patience and unseen life. The beach was a hundred yards away, the Atlantic breakers washing the empty sand. A school of dolphins leapt cleanly through the water, on their way south to the Gulf. The birds had gone, but the fish were ready to take their place in the air.

Mallory welcomed them. He knew that he had been walking down this sand-bar for little more than half an hour, but at the same time he felt that he had been there for days, even possibly weeks and months. In part of his mind he had always been there. The minutes were beginning to stretch, urged on by this eventless universe free of birds and aircraft. His memory faltered, he was forgetting his past, the clinic at Vancouver and its wounded children, his wife asleep in the hotel at Titusville, even his own identity. A single moment was a small instalment of forever — he plucked a fern leaf and watched it for minutes as it fell slowly to the ground, deferring to gravity in the most elegant way.

Aware now that he was entering the dream-time, Mallory ran on through the trees. He was moving in slow-motion, his weak legs carrying him across the leafy ground with the grace of an Olympic athlete. He raised his hand to touch a butterfly apparently asleep on the wing, embarking his outstretched fingers on an endless journey.

The forest that covered the sand-bar began to thin out, giving way to the beach-houses and motels of Cocoa Beach. A derelict hotel sat among the trees, its gates collapsed across the drive, Spanish moss hanging from a sign that advertised a zoo and theme park devoted to the space age. Through the waist-high palmettos the chromium and neon rockets rose from their stands like figures on amusement park carousels.

Laughing to himself, Mallory vaulted the gates and ran on past the rusting space ships. Behind the theme-park were overgrown tennis courts, a swimming pool and the remains of the small zoo, with an alligator pit, mammal cages and aviary. Happily, Mallory saw that the tenants had returned to their homes. An overweight zebra dozed in his concrete enclosure, a bored tiger stared in a cross-eyed way at his own nose, and an elderly caiman sunbathed on the grass beside the alligator pit.

Time was slowing now, coming almost to a halt. Mallory hung in mid-step, his bare feet in the air above the ground. Parked on the tiled path beside the swimming pool was a huge transparent dragonfly, the powered glider he had chased that morning.

Two wizened cheetahs sat in the shade under its wing, watching Mallory with their prim eyes. One of

them rose from the ground and slowly launched itself towards him, but it was twenty feet away and Mallory knew that it would never reach him. Its threadbare coat, refashioned from some old carpet bag, stretched itself into a lazy arch that seemed to freeze forever in mid-frame.

Mallory waited for time to stop. The waves were no longer running towards the beach, and were frozen ruffs of icing sugar. Fish hung in the sky, the wise dolphins happy to be in their new realm, faces smiling in the sun. The water spraying from the fountain at the shallow end of the pool now formed a glass parasol.

Only the cheetah was moving, still able to outrun time. It was now ten feet from him, its head tilted to one side as it aimed itself at Mallory's throat, its yellow claws more pointed than Hinton's bullets. But Mallory felt no fear for this violent cat. Without time it could never reach him, without time the lion could at last lie down with the lamb, the eagle with the vole.

He looked up at the vivid light, noticing the figure of a young woman who hung in the air with outstretched arms above the diving board. Suspended over the water in a swallow dive, her naked body flew as serenely as the dolphins above the sea. Her calm face gazed at the glass floor ten feet below her small, extended palms. She seemed unaware of Mallory, her eyes fixed on the mystery of her own flight, and he could see clearly the red marks left on her shoulders by the harness straps of the glider, and the silver arrow of her appendix scar pointing to her child-like pubis.

The cheetah was closer now, its claws picking at the threads of dried blood that laced Mallory's shoulders, its grey muzzle retracted to show its ulcerated gums and stained teeth. If he reached out he could embrace it, comfort all the memories of Africa, soothe the violence from its old pelt...

IV

Time had flowed out of Florida, as it had from the space age. After a brief pause, like a trapped film reel running free, it sped on again, rekindling a kinetic world.

Mallory sat in a deck chair beside the pool, watching the cheetahs as they rested in the shade under the glider. They crossed and uncrossed their paws like card-dealers palming an ace, now and then lifting their noses at the scent of this strange man and his blood.

Despite their sharp teeth, Mallory felt calm and rested, a sleeper waking from a complex but satisfying dream. He was glad to be surrounded by this little zoo with its backdrop of playful rockets, as innocent as an illustration from a children's book.

The young woman stood next to Mallory, keeping a concerned watch on him. She had dressed while Mallory recovered from his collision with the cheetah. After dragging away the boisterous beast she settled Mallory in the deck chair, then pulled on a patched leather flying suit. Was this the only clothing she had ever worn? A true child of the air, born and sleeping on the wing. With her over-bright mascara and blonde hair brushed into a vivid peruke, she resembled a leather-garbed parakeet, a punk madonna of the air-

ways. Worn NASA flashes on her shoulder gave her a biker's swagger. On the name-plate above her right breast was printed: Nightingale.

"Poor man - are you back? You're far, far away." Behind the childlike features, the soft mouth and boneless nose, a pair of adult eyes watched him warily. "Hey, you - what happened to your uniform? Are you in the police?"

Mallory took her hand, touching the heavy Apollo signet ring she wore on her wedding finger. From somewhere came the absurd notion that she was married to Hinton. Then he noticed her enlarged pupils, a hint of fever.

"Don't worry - I'm a doctor, Edward Mallory. I'm on holiday here with my wife."

"Holiday?" The girl shook her head, relieved but baffled. "That patrol car - I thought someone had stolen your uniform while you were...out. Dear doctor, no-one comes on holiday to Florida anymore. If you don't leave soon this is one vacation that may last forever."

"I know..." Mallory looked round at the zoo with its dozing tiger, the gay fountain and cheerful rockets. This was the amiable world of the Douanier Rousseau's Merry Jesters. He accepted the jeans and shirt which the girl gave him. He had liked being naked, not from any exhibitionist urge, but because it suited the vanished realm he had just visited. The impassive tiger with his skin of fire belonged to that world of light. "Perhaps I've come to the right place, though - I'd like to spend forever here. To tell the truth, I've just had a small taste of what forever is going to be like."

"No, thanks." Intrigued by Mallory, the girl squatted on the grass beside him. "Tell me, how often are you getting the attacks?"

"Every day. Probably more than I realise. And you..?" When she shook her head a little too quickly, Mallory added: "They're not that frightening, you know. In a way you want to go back."

"I can see. Doctor, you ought to be worried by that. Take your wife and leave - any moment now all the clocks are going to stop."

"That's why we're here - it's our one chance. My wife has even less time left than I have. We want to come to terms with everything - whatever that means. Not much any more."

"Doctor... The real Cape Kennedy is inside your head, not out there." Clearly unsettled by the presence of this marooned physician, the girl pulled on her flying helmet. She scanned the sky, where the gulls and swallows were again gathering, drawn into the air by the distant drone of an aero-engine. "Listen - an hour ago you were nearly killed. I tried to warn you. Our local stunt pilot doesn't like the police."

"So I found out. I'm glad he didn't hit you. I thought he was flying your glider."

"Hinton? He wouldn't be seen dead in that. He needs speed. Hinton's trying to join the birds."

"Hinton..." Repeating the name, Mallory felt a surge of fear and relief, realising that he was committed now to the course of action he had planned months ago when he left the clinic in Vancouver. "So Hinton is here."

"He's here." The girl nodded at Mallory, still unsure that he was not a policeman. "Not many people remember Hinton."

"I remember Hinton." As she fingered the Apollo signet ring he asked: "You're not married to him?"

"To Hinton? Doctor, you have some strange ideas. What are your patients like?"

"I often wonder. But you know Hinton?"

"Who does? He has other things in his mind. He fixed the pool here, and brought me the glider from the museum at Orlando." She added, archly: "Disneyland East – that's what they called Cape Kennedy in the early days."

"I remember – twenty years ago I worked for NASA."

"So did my father." She spoke sharply, angered by the mention of the space agency. "He was the last astronaut – Alan Shepley – the only one who didn't come back. And the only one they didn't wait for."

"Shepley was your father?" Startled, Mallory turned to look at the distant gantries of the launching grounds. "He died in the Shuttle. Then you know that Hinton..."

"Doctor, I don't think it was Hinton who really killed my father." Before Mallory could speak she lowered her goggles over her eyes. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. The important thing is that someone will be here when he comes down."

"You're waiting for him?"

"Shouldn't I, doctor?"

"Yes...but it was a long time ago. Besides, it's a million to one against him coming down here."

"That's not true. According to Hinton, Dad may actually come down somewhere along this coast. Hinton says the orbits are starting to decay. I search the beaches every day."

Mallory smiled at her encouragingly, admiring this punky but sad child. He remembered the news photographs of the astronaut's daughter, Gale Shepley, a babe in arms fiercely cradled by the widow outside the courtroom after the verdict. "I hope he comes. And your little zoo, Gale?"

"Nightgale," she corrected. "The zoo is for Dad. I want the world to be a special place for us when we go."

"You're leaving together?"

"In a sense – like you, doctor, and everyone else here."

"So you do get the attacks."

"Not often – that's why I keep moving. The birds are teaching me how to fly. Did you know that, doctor? The birds are trying to get out of time."

Already she was distracted by the unswept sky and the massing birds. After tying up the cheetahs she made her way quickly to the glider. "I have to leave, doctor. Can you ride a motorcycle? There's a Yamaha in the hotel lobby you can borrow."

But before taking off she confided to Mallory: "It's all wishful thinking, doctor, for Hinton too. When Dad comes it won't matter any more."

Mallory tried to help her launch the glider, but the filmy craft took off within its own length. Pedalling swiftly, she propelled it into the air, climbing over the chromium rockets of the theme park. The glider circled the hotel, then levelled its long, tapering wings and set off for the empty beaches of the north.

Restless without her, the tiger began to wrestle with the truck tyre suspended from the ceiling of its cage.

For a moment Mallory was tempted to unlock the door and join it. Avoiding the cheetahs chained to the diving board, he entered the empty hotel and took the staircase to the roof. From the ladder of the elevator house he watched the glider moving towards the space centre.

Alan Shepley – the first man to be murdered in space. All too well Mallory remembered the young pilot of the Shuttle, one of the last astronauts to be launched from Cape Kennedy before the curtain came down on the space age. A former Apollo pilot, Shepley had been a dedicated but likeable young man, as ambitious as the other astronauts and yet curiously naive.

Mallory, like everyone else, had much preferred him to the Shuttle's co-pilot, a research physicist who was then the token civilian among the astronauts. Mallory remembered how he had instinctively disliked Hinton on their first meeting at the medical centre. But from the start he had been fascinated by the man's awkwardness and irritability. In its closing days, the space programme had begun to attract people who were slightly unbalanced, and he recognised that Hinton belonged to this second generation of astronauts, mavericks with complex motives of their own, quite unlike the disciplined service pilots who had furnished the Mercury and Apollo flight-crews. Hinton had the intense and obsessive temperament of a Cortez, Pizarro or Drake, the hot blood and cold heart. It was Hinton who had exposed for the first time so many of the latent conundrums at the heart of the space programme, those psychological dimensions that had been ignored from its start and subsequently revealed, too late, in the crack-ups of the early astronauts, their slides into mysticism and melancholia.

"The best astronauts never dream," Russell Schweickart had once remarked. Not only did Hinton dream, he had torn the whole fabric of time and space, cracked the hour-glass from which time was running. Mallory was aware of his own complicity, he had been chiefly responsible for putting Shepley and Hinton together, guessing that the repressed and earnest Shepley might provide the trigger for a metaphysical experiment of a special sort.

At all events, Shepley's death had been the first murder in space, a crisis that Mallory had both stage-managed and unconsciously welcomed. The murder of the astronaut and the public unease that followed had marked the end of the space age, an awareness that man had committed an evolutionary crime by travelling into space, that he was tampering with the elements of his own consciousness. The fracture of that fragile continuum erected by the human psyche through millions of years had soon shown itself, in the confused sense of time displayed by the astronauts and NASA personnel, and then by the inhabitants of the towns near the space centre. Cape Kennedy and the whole of Florida itself became a poisoned land to be forever avoided like the nuclear testing grounds of Nevada and Utah.

Yet, perhaps, instead of going mad in space, Hinton had been the first man to "go sane". During his trial he pleaded his innocence and then refused to defend himself, viewing the international media circus with a stoicism that at times seemed bizarre. That silence had unnerved everyone – how could Hinton believe

himself innocent of a murder (he had locked Shepley into the docking module, vented his air supply and then cast him loose in his coffin, keeping up a matter-of-fact commentary the whole while) committed in full view of a thousand million television witnesses?

Alcatraz had been re-commissioned for Hinton, for this solitary prisoner isolated on the frigid island to prevent him contaminating the rest of the human race. After twenty years he was safely forgotten, and even the report of his escape was only briefly mentioned. He was presumed to have died, after crashing into the icy waters of the bay in a small aircraft he had secretly constructed. Mallory had travelled down to San Francisco to see the waterlogged craft, a curious ornithopter built from the yew trees that Hinton had been allowed to grow in the prison island's stony soil, boosted by a home-made rocket engine powered by a fertiliser-based explosive. He had waited twenty years for the slow-growing evergreens to be strong enough to form the wings that would carry him to freedom.

Then, only six months after Hinton's death, Mallory had been told by an old NASA colleague of the strange stunt pilot who had been seen flying his antique aircraft at Cape Kennedy, some native of the air who had so far eluded the half-hearted attempts to ground him. The descriptions of the bird-cage aeroplanes reminded Mallory of the drowned ornithopter dragged up onto the winter beach...

So Hinton had returned to Cape Kennedy. As Mallory set off on the Yamaha along the coast road, past the deserted motels and cocktail bars of Cocoa Beach, he looked out at the bright Atlantic sand, so unlike the rocky shingle of the prison island. But was the ornithopter a decoy, like all the antique aircraft that Hinton flew above the space centre, machines that concealed some other aim?

Some other escape?

V

Fifteen minutes later, as Mallory sped along the NASA causeway towards Titusville, he was overtaken by an old Wright biplane. Crossing the Banana River, he noticed that the noise of a second engine had drowned the Yamaha's. The venerable flying machine appeared above the trees, the familiar gaunt-faced pilot sitting in the open cockpit. Barely managing to pull ahead of the Yamaha, the pilot flew down to within ten feet of the road, gesturing to Mallory to stop, then cut back his engine and settled the craft onto the weed-grown concrete.

"Mallory, I've been looking for you! Come on, doctor!"

Mallory hesitated, the gritty backwash of the Wright's props stinging the open wounds under his shirt. As he peered among the struts Hinton seized his arm and lifted him onto the passenger seat.

"Mallory, yes...it's you still!" Hinton pushed his goggles back onto his bony forehead, revealing a pair of blood-flecked eyes. He gazed at Mallory with open amazement, as if surprised that Mallory had aged at all in the past twenty years, but delighted that he had somehow survived. "Nightingale just told me you were here. Doctor Mysterium... I nearly killed you!"

"You're trying again....!" Mallory clung to the frayed seat straps as Hinton opened the throttle. The biplane

gazelled into the air. In a gust of wind across the exposed causeway it flew backwards for a few seconds, then climbed vertically and banked across the trees towards the distant gantries. Thousands of swallows and martins overtook them on all sides, ignoring Hinton as if well-used to this erratic aviator and his absurd machines.

As Hinton worked the rudder tiller, Mallory glanced at this feverish and undernourished man. The years in prison and the rushing air above Cape Kennedy had leached all trace of iron salts from his pallid skin. His raw eyelids, the nail-picked septum of his strong nose and his scarred lips were blanched almost silver in the wind. He had gone beyond exhaustion and malnutrition into a nervous realm where the rival elements of his warring mind were locked together like the cogs of an overwound clock. As he pummelled Mallory's arm it was clear that he had already forgotten the years since their last meeting. He pointed to the forest below them, to the viaducts, concrete decks and blockhouses, eager to show off his domain.

They had reached the heart of the space complex, where the gantries rose like gallows put out to rent. In the centre was the giant crawler, the last of the Shuttles mounted vertically on its launching platform. Its rusting tracks lay around it, the chains of an unshackled colossus.

Here at Cape Kennedy time had not stood still but moved into reverse. The huge fuel tank and auxiliary motors of the Shuttle resembled the domes and minarets of a replica Taj Mahal. Lines of antique aircraft were drawn up on the runway below the crawler – a Lilienthal glider lying on its side like an ornate fan window, a Mignet Flying Flea, the Fokker, Spad and Sopwith Camel, and a Wright Flyer that went back to the earliest days of aviation. As they circled the launch platform Mallory almost expected to see a crowd of Edwardian aviators thronging this display of ancient craft, pilots in gaiters and overcoats, women passengers in hats fitted with leather straps.

Other ghosts haunted the daylight at Cape Kennedy. When they landed Mallory stepped into the shadow of the launch platform, an iron cathedral shunned by the sky. An unsettling silence came in from the dense forest that filled the once open decks of the space centre, from the eyeless bunkers and rusting camera towers.

"Mallory, I'm glad you came!" Hinton pulled off his flying helmet, exposing a lumpy scalp under his close-cropped hair – Mallory remembered that he had once been attacked by a berserk warder. "I couldn't believe it was you! And Anne? Is she all right?"

"She's here, at the hotel in Titusville."

"I know, I've just seen her on the roof. She looked..." Hinton's voice dropped, in his concern he had forgotten what he was doing. He began to walk in a circle, and then rallied himself. "Still, it's good to see you. It's more than I hoped for – you were the one person who knew what was going on here."

"Did I?" Mallory searched for the sun, hidden behind the cold bulk of the launch platform. Cape Kennedy was even more sinister than he had expected, like some ancient death camp. "I don't think I –"

"Of course you knew! In a way we were collaborators – believe me, Mallory, we will be again. I've a lot

to tell you..." Happy to see Mallory, but concerned for the shivering physician, Hinton embraced him with his restless hands. When Mallory flinched, trying to protect his shoulders, Hinton whistled and peered solicitously inside his shirt.

"Mallory, I'm sorry — that poise car confused me. They'll be coming for me soon, we have to move fast. But you don't look too well, doctor. Time's running out, I suppose, it's difficult to understand at first..."

"I'm starting to. What about you, Hinton? I need to talk to you about everything. You look —"

Hinton grimaced. He slapped his hip, impatient with his undernourished body, an atrophied organ that he would soon discard. "I had to starve myself, the wingloading of that machine was so low. It took years, or they might have noticed. Those endless medical checks, they were terrified that I was brewing up an even more advanced psychosis — they couldn't grasp that I was opening the door to a new world." He gazed round at the space centre, at the empty wind. "We had to get out of time — that's what the space programme was all about..."

He beckoned Mallory towards a steel staircase that led up to the assembly deck six storeys above them. "We'll go topside. I'm living in the Shuttle — there's a crew module of the Mars platform still inside the hold, a damn sight more comfortable than most of the hotels in Florida." He added, with an ironic gleam: "I imagine it's the last place they'll come to look for me."

Mallory began to climb the staircase. He tried not to touch the greasy rivets and sweating rails, lowering his eyes from the tiled skin of the Shuttle as it emerged above the assembly deck. After all the years of thinking about Cape Kennedy he was still unprepared for the strangeness of this vast, reductive machine, a juggernaut that could be pushed by its worshippers across the planet, devouring the years and hours and seconds.

Even Hinton seemed subdued, scanning the sky as if waiting for Shepley to appear. He was careful not to turn his back on Mallory, clearly suspecting that the former NASA physician had been sent to trap him.

"Flight and time, Mallory, they're bound together. The birds have always known that. To get out of time we first need to learn to fly. That's why I'm here. I'm teaching myself to fly, going back through all these old planes to the beginning. I want to fly without wings..."

As the Shuttle's delta wing fanned out above them, Mallory swayed against the rail. Exhausted by the climb, he tried to pump his lungs. The silence was too great, this stillness at the centre of the stopped clock of the world. He searched the breathless forest and runways for any sign of movement. He needed one of Hinton's machines to take off and go racketting across the sky.

"Mallory, you're going...? Don't worry, I'll help you through it." Hinton had taken his elbow and steadied him on his feet. Mallory felt the light suddenly steepen, the intense white glare he had last seen as the cheetah sprang towards him. Time left the air, wavered briefly as he struggled to retain his hold on the passing seconds.

A flock of martins swept across the assembly deck,

swirled like exploding soot around the Shuttle. Were they trying to warn him? Roused by the brief flurry, Mallory felt his eyes clear. He had been able to shake off the attack, but it would come again.

"Doctor — ? You'll be all right." Hinton was plainly disappointed as he watched Mallory steady himself at the rail. "Try not to fight it, doctor, everyone makes that mistake."

"It's going..." Mallory pushed him away. Hinton was too close to the rail, the man's manic gestures could jostle him over the edge. "The birds —"

"Of course, we'll join the birds! Mallory, we can all fly, every one of us. Think of it, doctor, true flight. We'll live forever in the air!"

"Hinton..." Mallory backed along the deck as Hinton seized the greasy rail, about to catapult himself onto the wind. He needed to get away from this madman and his lunatic schemes.

Hinton waved to the aircraft below, saluting the ghosts in their cockpits. "Lilienthal and the Wrights, Curtiss and Bleriot, even old Mignet — they're here, doctor. That's why I came to Cape Kennedy. I needed to go back to the beginning, long before aviation sent us all off on the wrong track. When time stops, Mallory, we'll step from this deck and fly towards the sun. You and I, doctor, and Anne..."

Hinton's voice was deepening, a cavernous boom. The white flank of the Shuttle's hull was a lantern of translucent bone, casting a spectral light over the sombre forest. Mallory swayed forward, on some half-formed impulse he wanted Hinton to vault the rail, step out onto the air and challenge the birds. If he pressed his shoulders...

"Doctor — ?"

Mallory raised his hands, but he was unable to draw any nearer to Hinton. Like the cheetah, he was forever a few inches away.

Hinton had taken his arm in a comforting gesture, urging him towards the rail.

"Fly, doctor..."

Mallory stood at the edge. His skin had become part of the air, invaded by the light. He needed to shrug aside the huge encumbrance of time and space, this rusting deck and the clumsy tracked vehicle. He could hang free, suspended forever above the forest, master of time and light. He would fly...

A flurry of charged air struck his face. Fracture lines appeared in the wind around him. The transparent wings of a powered glider soared past, its propeller chopping at the sunlight.

Hinton's hands gripped his shoulders, bundling him impatiently over the rail. The glider slewed sideways, wheeled and flew towards them again. The sunlight lanced from its propeller, a stream of photons that drove time back into Mallory's eyes. Pulling himself free from Hinton, he fell to his knees as the young woman swept past in her glider. He saw her anxious face behind the goggles, and heard her voice shout warningly at Hinton.

But Hinton had already gone. His feet rang against the metal staircase. As he took off in the Fokker he called out angrily to Mallory, disappointed with him. Mallory knelt by the edge of the steel deck, waiting for time to flow back into his mind, hands gripping the oily rail with the strength of the new-born.

Tape 24: August 17.

Again, no sign of Hinton today.

Anne is asleep. An hour ago, when I returned from the drugstore, she looked at me with focused eyes for the first time in a week. By an effort I managed to feed her in the few minutes she was fully awake. Time has virtually stopped for her, there are long periods when she is clearly in an almost stationary world, a series of occasionally varying static tableaux. Then she wakes briefly and starts talking about Hinton and a flight to Miami she is going to make with him in his Cessna. Yet she seems refreshed by these journeys into the light, as if her mind is drawing nourishment from the very fact that no time is passing.

I feel the same, despite the infected wound on my shoulder – Hinton's dirty finger-nails. The attacks come a dozen times a day, everything slows to a barely perceptible flux. The intensity of light is growing, photons backing up all the way to the sun. As I left the drugstore I watched a parakeet cross the road over my head, it seemed to take two hours to fly fifty feet.

Perhaps Anne has another week before time stops for her. As for myself, three weeks? It's curious to think that at, say, precisely 3.47 pm, September 8, time will stop forever. A single micro-second will flash past unnoticed for everyone else, but for me will last an eternity. I'd better decide how I want to spend it!

Tape 25: August 19.

A hectic two days, Anne had a relapse at noon yesterday, vaso-vagal shock brought on by waking just as Hinton strafed the hotel in his Wright Flyer. I could barely detect her heartbeat, spent hours massaging her calves and thighs (I'd happily go out into eternity caressing my wife). I managed to stand her up, walked her up and down the balcony in the hope that the noise of Hinton's aircraft might jolt her back onto the rails. In fact, this morning she spoke to me in a completely lucid way, obviously appalled by my derelict appearance. For her it's one of those quiet afternoons three weeks ago.

We could still leave, start up one of the abandoned cars and reach the border at Jacksonville before the last minutes run out. I have to keep reminding myself why we came here in the first place. Running north will solve nothing. If there is a solution it's here, somewhere between Hinton's obsessions and Shepley's orbiting coffin, between the space centre and those bright, eerie transits that are all too visible at night. I hope I don't go out just as it arrives, spend the rest of eternity looking at the vaporising corpse of the man I helped to die in space. I keep thinking of that tiger. Somehow I can calm it.

Tape 26: August 25.

3.30 pm. The first uninterrupted hour of conscious time I've had in days. When I woke 15 minutes ago Hinton had just finished strafing the hotel – the palms were shaking dust and insects all over the balcony. Clearly Hinton is trying to keep us awake, postponing the end until he's ready to play his last card, or perhaps until I'm out of the way and he's free to be with Anne.

I'm still thinking about his motives. He seems to have embraced the destruction of time, as if this whole malaise were an opportunity that we ought to seize, the next evolutionary step forward. He was steering me to the edge of the assembly deck, urging me to fly, if Gale Shepley hadn't appeared in her glider I would have dived over the rail. In a strange way he was helping me, guiding me into that new world without time. When he turned Shepley loose from the Shuttle he didn't think he was killing him, but setting him free.

The ever-more primitive aircraft – Hinton's quest for a pure form of flight, which he will embark upon at the last moment. A Santos-Dumont flew over yesterday, an ungainly box-kite, he's given up his World War I machines. He's deliberately flying badly designed aircraft, all part of his attempt to escape from winged aviation into absolute flight, poetical rather than aeronautical structures.

The roots of shamanism and levitation, and the erotic cathexis of flight – can one see them as an attempt to escape from time? The shaman's supposed ability to leave his physical form and fly with his spiritual body, the psychopomp guiding the souls of the deceased and able to achieve a mastery of fire, together seem to be linked with those defects of the vestibular apparatus brought on by prolonged exposure to zero gravity during the space flights. We should have welcomed them.

That tiger – I'm becoming obsessed with the notion that it's on fire.

Tape 27: August 28.

An immense silence today, not a murmur over the soft green deck of Florida. Hinton may have killed himself. Perhaps all this flying is some kind of expiatory ritual, when he dies the shaman's curse will be lifted. But do I want to go back into time? By contrast, that static world of brilliant light pulls at the heart like a vision of Eden. If time is a primitive mental structure we're right to reject it. There's a sense in which not only the shaman's but all mystical and religious beliefs are an attempt to devise a world without time. Why did primitive man, who needed a brain only slightly larger than the tiger in Gale's zoo, in fact have a mind almost equal to those of Freud and Leonardo? Perhaps all that surplus neural capacity was there to release him from time, and it has taken the space age, and the sacrifice of the first astronaut, to achieve that single goal.

Kill Hinton... How, though?

Tape 28: September 3.

Missing days. I'm barely aware of the flux of time any longer. Anne lies on the bed, wakes for a few minutes and makes a futile attempt to reach the roof, as if the sky offers some kind of escape. I've just brought her down from the staircase. It's too much of an effort to forage for food, on my way to the supermarket this morning the light was so bright that I had to close my eyes, hand-holding my way around the streets like a blind beggar. I seemed to be standing on the floor of an immense furnace.

Anne is increasingly restless, murmuring to herself in some novel language, as if preparing for a journey. I recorded one of her drawn-out monologues, like some Gaelic love-poem, then speeded it up to normal time.

An agonised "Hinton...Hinton..."

It's taken her twenty years to learn.

Tape 29: September 6.

There can't be more than a few days left. The dream-time comes on a dozen stretches each day, everything slows to a halt. From the balcony I've just watched a flock of orioles cross the street. They seemed to take hours, their unmoving wings supporting them as they hung above the trees.

At last the birds have learned to fly.

Anne is awake...

(Anne): Who's learned to fly?

(EM): It's all right – the birds.

(Anne): Did you teach them? What am I talking about? How long have I been away?

(EM): Since dawn. Tell me what you were dreaming.

(Anne): Is this a dream? Help me up. God, it's dark in the street. There's no time left here. Edward, find Hinton. Do whatever he says.

VII

Kill Hinton...

As the engine of the Yamaha clacked into life, Mallory straddled the seat and looked back at the hotel. At any moment, as if seizing the last few minutes left to her, Anne would leave the bedroom and try to make her way to the roof. The stationary clocks in Titusville were about to tell the real time for her, eternity for this lost woman would be a flight of steps around an empty elevator shaft.

Kill Hinton...he had no idea how. He set off through the streets to the east of Titusville, shakily weaving in and out of the abandoned cars. With its stiff gearbox and unsteady throttle the Yamaha was exhausting to control. He was driving through an unfamiliar suburb of the town, a terrain of tract houses, shopping malls and car parks laid out for the NASA employees in the building boom of the 1960s. He passed an overturned truck that had spilled its cargo of television sets across the road, and a laundry van that had careened through the window of a liquor store.

Three miles to the east were the gantries of the space centre. An aircraft hung in the air above them, a primitive helicopter with an overhead propeller. The tapering blades were stationary, as if Hinton had at last managed to dispense with wings.

Mallory pressed on towards the Cape, the engine of the motorcycle at full throttle. The tracts of suburban housing unravelled before him, endlessly repeating themselves, the same shopping malls, bars and motels, the same stores and used-car lots that he and Anne had seen in their journey across the continent. He could almost believe that he was driving through Florida again, through the hundreds of small towns that merged together, a suburban universe in which these identical liquor stores, car parks and shopping malls formed the building blocks of a strand of urban DNA generated by the nucleus of the space centre. He had driven down this road, across these silent intersections, not for minutes or hours but for years and decades. The unravelling strand covered the entire surface of the globe, and then swept out into space to pave the walls of the universe before it curved back on itself to land here at its departure point at the space

centre. Again he passed the overturned truck beside its scattered television sets, again the laundry van in the liquor store window. He would forever pass them, forever cross the same intersection, see the same rusty sign above the same motel cabin...

“Doctor...”

The smell of burning flesh quickened in Mallory's nose. His right calf was pressed against the exhaust manifold of the idling Yamaha. Charred fragments of his cotton trouser clung to the raw wound. As the young woman in the black flying suit ran across the street Mallory pushed himself away from the clumsy machine, stumbled over its spinning wheels and knelt in the road.

He had stopped at an intersection half a mile from the centre of Titusville. The vast planetary plain of parking lots had withdrawn, swirled down some cosmic funnel and then contracted to this small suburban enclave of a single derelict motel, two tract houses and a bar. Twenty feet away the blank screens of the television sets stared at him from the road beside the overturned truck. A few steps further along the sidewalk the laundry van lay in its liquor store window, dusty bottles of vodka and bourbon shaded by the wing-tip of the glider which Gale Shepley had landed in the street.

“Dr Mallory! Can you hear me? Dear man...” She pushed back Mallory's head and peered into his eyes, then switched off the still clacking engine of the Yamaha. “I saw you sitting here, there was something – My God, your leg! Did Hinton...?”

“No...I set fire to myself.” Mallory climbed to his feet, an arm around the girl's shoulder. He was still trying to clear his head, there was something curiously beguiling about that vast suburban world... “I was a fool trying to ride it. I must see Hinton.”

“Doctor, listen to me...” The girl shook his hands, her eyes wide with fever. Her mascara and hair were even more bizarre than he remembered. “You're dying! A day or two more, an hour maybe, you'll be gone. We'll find a car and I'll drive you north.” With an effort she took her eyes from the sky. “I don't like to leave Dad, but you've got to get away from here, it's inside your head now.”

Mallory lifted to lift the heavy Yamaha. “Hinton – it's all that's left now. For Anne, too. Somehow I have to...kill him.”

“He knows that, doctor – ” She broke off at the sound of an approaching aero-engine. An aircraft was hovering over the nearby streets, its shadowy bulk visible through the palm leaves, the flicker of a rotor blade across the sun. As they crouched among the television sets it passed above their heads. An antique autogyro, it lumbered through the air like an aerial harvester, its free-spinning rotor apparently powered by the sunlight. Sitting in the open cockpit, the pilot was too busy with his controls to search the streets below.

Besides, as Mallory knew, Hinton had already found his quarry. Standing on the roof of the hotel, a dressing gown around her shoulders, was Anne Mallory. At last she had managed to climb the stairs, driven on by her dream of the sky. She stared sightlessly at the autogyro, stepping back a single pace only when it circled the hotel and came in to land through a storm

of leaves and dust. When it touched down on the roof the draught from its propeller stripped the gown from her shoulders. Naked, she turned to face the autogyro, lover of this strange machine come to save her from a time-reft world.

VIII

As they reached the NASA causeway huge columns of smoke were rising from the space centre. From the pillion seat of the motorcycle Mallory looked up at the billows boiling into the stained air. The forest was flushed with heat, the foliage glowing like furnace coals.

Had Hinton refuelled the Shuttle's engines and prepared the craft for lift-off? He would take Anne with him, and cast them both loose into space as he had done with Shepley, joining the dead astronaut in his orbital bier.

Smoke moved through the trees ahead of them, driven by the explosions coming from the launch site of the Shuttle. Gale throttled back the Yamaha and pointed to a break in the clouds. The Shuttle still sat on its platform, motors silent, the white hull reflecting the flash of explosions from the concrete runways.

Hinton had set fire to his antique planes. Thick with oily smoke, the flames lifted from the glowing shells slumped on their undercars. The Curtiss biplane was burning briskly. A frantic blaze devoured the engine compartment of the Fokker, detonated the fuel tank and set off the machine-gun ammunition. The exploding cartridges kicked through the wings as they folded like a house of cards.

Gale steadied the Yamaha with her feet, and skirted the glowing trees two hundred yards from the line of incandescent machines. The explosions flashed in her goggles, blanching her vivid make-up and giving her blonde hair an ash-like whiteness. The heat flared against Mallory's sallow face as he searched the aircraft for any sign of Hinton. Fanned by the flames that roared from its fuselage, the autogyro's propeller rotated swiftly, caught fire and spun in a last blazing carnival. Beside it, flames raced along the wings of the Wright Flyer, in a shower of sparks the burning craft lifted into the air and fell onto its back upon the red-hot hulk of the Sopwith Camel. Ignited by the intense heat, the primed engine of the Flying Flea roared into life, propelled the tiny aircraft in a scurrying arc among the burning wrecks, setting off the Spad and Bleriot before it overturned in a furnace of rolling flame.

"Doctor - on the assembly deck!"

Mallory followed the girl's raised hand. A hundred feet above them, Anne and Hinton stood side by side on the metal landing of the stairway. The flames from the burning aircraft wavered against their faces, as if they were already moving through the air together. Although Hinton's arm was around Anne's waist,

they seemed unaware of each other when they stepped forward into the light.

IX

As always during his last afternoons at Cocoa Beach, Mallory rested by the swimming pool of the abandoned hotel, watching the pale glider float patiently across the undisturbed skies of Cape Kennedy. In this peaceful harbour, surrounded by the drowsing inmates of the zoo, he listened to the fountain cast its crystal gems onto the grass beside his chair. The spray of water was now almost stationary, like the glider and the wind and the watching cheetahs, elements of an emblematic and glowing world.

As time slipped away from him, Mallory stood under the fountain, happy to see it transform itself into a glass tree that shed an opalescent fruit onto his shoulders and hands. Dolphins flew through the air over the nearby sea. Once he immersed himself in the pool, delighted to be embedded in this huge block of condensed time.

Fortunately, Gale Shepley had rescued him before he drowned. Mallory knew that she was becoming bored with him. She was intent now only on the search for her father, confident that he would soon be returning from the tideways of space. At night the trajectories were ever lower, tracks of charged particles that soared across the forest. She had almost ceased to eat, and Mallory was glad that once her father arrived she would at last give up her flying. Then the two of them would leave together.

Mallory had made his own preparations for departure. The key to the tiger cage he held always in his hand. There was little time left to him now, the light-filled world had transformed itself into a series of tableaux from a pageant that celebrated the founding days of creation. In the finale every element in the universe, however humble, would take its place on the stage in front of him.

He watched the tiger waiting for him at the bars of its cage. The great cats, like the reptiles before them, had always stood partly out of time. The flames that marked its pelt reminded him of the fire that had consumed the aircraft at the space centre, the fire through which Anne and Hinton still flew forever.

He left the pool and walked towards the tiger cage. He would unlock the door soon, embrace these flames, lie down with this beast in a world beyond time.

J.G. Ballard first came to prominence in the pages of *New Worlds and Science Fantasy* in the late 1950s. With such books as *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Terminal Beach* (1964) he established himself as Britain's most powerfully original SF writer. His works since then include *Crash* (1973), *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) and the forthcoming collection *Myths of the Near Future* (Cape, 1982).

SEASONS OUT OF TIME



Alex Stewart

He stood in the doorway for a moment, surveying the bar, while the chill autumn mist pushed impatiently past him. The barmaid shivered.

"Well, either come in or go out."

The door swung to behind him, while his eyes flickered round the room.

Handpumps. Dark, polished wood. Horsebrasses flickered in the firelight. He approached the bar.

"Quiet in here tonight."

The barmaid was staring at his clothes. She looked up swiftly, hiding her embarrassment.

"There's an op on tonight." She bit her lip, glancing at one of the posters on the wall. Careless talk costs lives. The man smiled.

"I heard them going over. Quite a noise." He turned, meeting the eyes of the girl across the room. She quirked her mouth in greeting, and raised an empty glass. He turned back to the bar, and ordered drinks.

"One and eleven, please."

He rummaged in the pocket of his windcheater, pulling out a handful of change. Sesterces. Some Jacobean farthings. Half a crown. He checked the date. Nineteen thirty-eight. That'd do. He picked up his change and the glasses, and approached the corner table.

"The usual all right?" He eased his rucksack to the floor. The girl took her drink.

"Fine. Any news?"

"Of the others?" He sank gratefully into the chair. "Not a lot. I ran into Dieter a while back."

She nodded.

"Me too. He said he'd met you. Rome, wasn't it?"

"Just outside it. You?"

"Paris. Eighteen sixties. It rained."

"Anyone else?" He sipped his drink. The girl shook her head.

"How about you?"

"Only Chen. We saw *The Maltese Falcon*. It passed the time."

"Sounds an interesting place."

He shrugged.

"Middle America somewhere. God knows the date."

She pushed her hat aside, making room for her drink on the tabletop.

"I thought I saw Karen once. But I slipped again."

"It happens." He drained the glass. "Another?"

She shook her head.

"I'm all right for the moment."

He returned to the bar.

"Same again please, love."

The barmaid filled the order, trying not to stare at him again. She couldn't, so she glanced at the girl he was with. Then she turned away, quickly. She wasn't a Wren after all. Two of a kind, all right....

She glanced up at the man again, meeting his eyes for the first time, and the smile congealed on her lips. Then he smiled back, and took the drink.

She remembered his eyes for a long time afterwards.

"It's getting to you, isn't it?"
"What?" He looked up.

"You've been staring at nothing for the last five minutes."

He shrugged.

"I'm tired, that's all."

"We all are, Mike. Tired and depressed." The girl shook her head. "But you can't let it get to you. Or you'll go straight round the loop."

He shrugged again.
 "It's escape of a sort."
 "It's not, Mike, believe me." She leaned across the table. "Didn't Dieter tell you?"
 "About Karen?" He nodded. "I half expected it, to be honest. When you saw her..."
 "I said I thought it was her." She shivered. "I was actually glad to slip."
 "She was always unstable. Even before, I think." He drank again.
 "Dieter said she tried to cut her wrists. When that didn't work, she just snapped." She drained the glass.
 "Immortality's a pain."
 "It's just the futility of it that gets to me." She toyed with her empty glass. "Never being able to do anything."
 "Ain't that the truth." He drank. She watched him carefully.
 "Something's upset you, hasn't it?"
 "Ten out of ten. You must have been great on the beat."
 "I was. What happened?"
 "Well..." He paused, reluctant, and tilted the glass again. "I hit London a couple of slips back. Nineteen sixteen. It was summer." He swirled the beer reflectively. "A perfect summer evening. Warm, dry, just the hint of a breeze. It was beautiful." He paused. "I turned into a sidestreet. There was a girl there, pushing a pram. And then I heard gunfire."
 "What kind of gun?"
 "Heavy. Anti-aircraft. She stopped, and looked up, over my shoulder. And I turned." He drank again.
 "It was a Zeppelin. They were caught in the searchlights, and trying to gain height. I saw the ballast go first. Then they started to throw out the bomb load." He leaned across the table. "We could hear them detonate, one after the other. Then one started dropping straight for us." He lifted the glass, and studied it.
 "I swear to you, Helen, I could follow it every inch of the way. So could she. She just stood there, hypnotised by it. I tried to grab her arm, get her to run, but it was like trying to catch smoke. And then it hit." He shook his head. "I could see debris, and pieces of shrapnel sail through me, like mist. They went through the girl and the kid as well. But it mattered to them."
 The girl shrugged.
 "These things happen, Mike. You can't change history."
 "I know that, damn it!" The barmaid looked up as his fist hit the tabletop. "But she took seven minutes to die. And all I could do was watch."
 He drained the glass. She took it from his hand, and approached the bar.
 "Nothing wrong, is there?"
 She shook her head.
 "It's all right. He's just a little upset, that's all."
 "What about?" The barmaid began to fill her order.
 "He saw a girl die in an air raid."
 "Oh, I'm sorry." She set down the drinks, and punched the till. "We're getting our own back tonight, though. Dresden again, I expect." She turned back, holding the change. "That'll teach them."
 "I'm sure it will." The girl turned away, taking the drinks, leaving the barmaid still trying to place her uniform.

"Pleasant chat?"
 "Oh yes." She swallowed half the drink, and grimaced. "They're bombing Dresden tonight. She seems to like the idea."
 He shook his head.
 "She doesn't realise, Helen. How could she?" He tilted his own glass. "Chen hit Hiroshima once, about an hour after the bomb. He doesn't talk about it."
 "Once was enough, I guess. It was for me." She drank again. "Sometimes I wonder. You know. If anyone survived."
 He shrugged.
 "We did."
 "You call this survival?" She drained her glass.
 "Anything's better than dead." He swallowed reflectively. "Maybe we are dead. And we haunt the past, because there isn't any future left."
 "That's not funny, Mike."
 "It's not meant to be."
 They sat in silence for a while. Then she leaned across the table.
 "Supposing..."
 She slipped. He felt the faint puff of air on his face, as it rushed to fill the space she'd occupied. There was a sharp crack, and a tingle of ozone. The barmaid jumped, dropping a beer mug.
 "What was that?" The mug rocked gently on the counter. He sighed.
 "There's a war on. You hear bangs all the time."
 "Not in here we don't." She looked at him suspiciously. "Where's your friend?"
 "She had to leave."
 "So do you. I called time ages ago." She started to rack up the glasses. "I don't know. Haven't you people got homes to go to?"

Alex Stewart is 23 and has spent much of the past two years on the dole. He has recently started work as editor of a newsletter for YOPS administrators in East Anglia. "Seasons Out of Time" is his first published story. When not engaged in writing, he is keen on sports: archery, karate and pistol shooting.

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THE THIRD TEST

ANDREW WEINER

Loomis paced the English dressing room, watching the rain beat against the windows. *Rain stopped play.* Even after ten years as a professional cricketer, it was something he had never really adjusted to. One minute you were out there on the pitch, concentrating on nothing but that hard red ball flying towards you. You were there, you were in control, everything revolved around you. And then the skies opened and you were scampering for shelter like a drowning rat. *Rain stopped play.*

The Headingley ground was already deserted. The spectators had streamed out within minutes of the start of the downpour. It was clear that there could be no further play today, and perhaps not tomorrow either. It was simply a matter of waiting around for the umpires' official announcement.

"And so," said the voice of the BBC commentator, issuing from a small transistor perched precariously on top of the lockers, "to recap the day's play, England, one down in the series, were 21 for the loss of one wicket overnight in reply to Australia's 505 for eight wickets declared. This morning we once again saw England collapse before some very fast bowling indeed from Weed and Franzetti. The home team had limped to 88 for six when rain halted the proceedings. Only the England Captain, Loomis, who remained undefeated on 34 not out, looked remotely comfortable..."

Comfortable! Loomis would have liked to see that self-satisfied son of a bitch pad up and face those Aussie assassins. *Comfortable!* He had never been more terrified in his life. His body was covered in bruises, and twice he had come within a half inch of getting his skull cracked wide open. It was almost enough to make him wear one of those stupid crash helmets.

"Lovely weather," said Carter, the jovial English spin bowler, "for ducks."

Loomis did not deign to acknowledge this little joke, which he had heard all-too-often before. Indeed,

on hearing it now something seemed to tighten inside his head, and it was all he could do to stop himself from ramming his fist into Carter's bovinely cheerful face. Which was not very fitting behaviour for a Captain of England, even one possibly on the brink of becoming an ex-Captain.

This was only Loomis's second Test series as Captain, and his previous experience – touring India and Pakistan the winter before – had been all sweetness and light in comparison. Those frail and undernourished little Asians had hardly been able to summon up the murderous speed of their Aussie counterparts, instead relying upon the wiles of their crafty little spin bowlers – who, in the event, had not proved quite wily enough to outfox Loomis and his boys.

But these Australian giants were another matter entirely. England had already gone down to ignominious defeat in the First Test, and had been on the point of blowing this one even more comprehensively when rain had mercifully washed out the day's play. The weather boys were now predicting that the rain would continue through to Tuesday, saving them from almost certain defeat. But that was just a temporary reprieve. Events, it seemed to Loomis, were building up towards some sort of dreadful climax.

The radio commentary had now given way to a programme of classical music. Across the dressing room, a TV set droned away with the afternoon news. The *Financial Times* Index was off another six points. Sterling had continued to slide on the foreign exchanged markets. There was no break in sight in the oil-rig strike.

"Lovely weather isn't it?" Carter asked Doug Dawson, the massive, ponderous veteran opening batsman. Despite his outward appearance of monumental and implacable calm, it was quite obvious to Loomis that the man had completely lost his nerve against the fast stuff, and his brief performance at the crease the

previous evening had been simply embarrassing.

"For ducks," Dawson said, and both laughed uproariously.

Carter and Alison went back together a long time. Much too long. That was the problem with this team, too much deadwood. It was time to cut it away. Dawson would have to go, Loomis determined. He would insist upon it at the next selectors' meeting. Although he knew that the selectors, mostly recently retired veterans themselves, would be reluctant to ditch good old Doug Dawson. And there was also, he reminded himself, some reason to doubt whether he personally would retain his place after this latest debacle.

The TV news gave way to a soap opera, which several of the players were watching avidly. Loomis monitored it vaguely as he continued to pace. The events, as usual, revolved around various marital infidelities. His thoughts flickered back briefly to an idyllic night in the New Delhi Hilton, straddled by a dusky little Asian princess embodying, or so it seemed, all the accumulated erotic wisdom of the ancient east. A very far cry from his usual marital couplings in Henderson.

He had called his wife as soon as they had left the field. She had been unable to watch his performance on TV due to a rotating power cut. Their eldest, Jilly, was still running a slight fever. The bathroom tap was still spouting uncontrollably, and no plumber was available until the middle of next month.

"We interrupt this broadcast," said an authoritative sounding voice, "to bring you this special bulletin."

The King, Loomis thought. The King is dead. Or the government has resigned. Something important, at any rate.

With growing excitement he watched as the soap opera faded out, to be replaced by the face of a newscaster. At first glance he looked like any other newscaster: grave, dignified, severe, impossibly controlled. But there was, Loomis realized as he stepped closer to the screen, something mad about his eyes.

This is it, he thought. This is really it.

He did not pause to reflect upon what it was. It was simply whatever it was he had yearned for so incoherently for so very long – a war, a revolution, the second coming of Jesus. Anything, really, anything at all which would sweep away what was and make the whole world unimaginably different.

At first he had thought that it might be in playing cricket for England, or better still in captaining it. His ambitions had focused upon earning the immortality of an entry in the record books, not to mention the adulation of his fellow countrymen. But these excitements, glorious as they were at the time, had dimmed all too quickly.

Transcendence had continued to elude him. His life, after all, had gone on. And on. And even a thousand glorious nights in the New Delhi Hilton could not shatter its ineluctable pattern. Which was no more or less than a steady slipping and sliding downhill all the way towards an ultimate nonbeing. Entranced since childhood with the game of cricket, with its glacial slowness and soothing repetitiveness and ridiculous otherworldliness, Loomis had finally awoken from its spell. For the clocks, he had realized, continued to tick onwards, ever onwards, even as he tried to lose himself in the timeless rituals of the game.

"Extraterrestrial beings," said the newscaster, "visi-

tors to our planet from another part of the galaxy, are currently meeting with world leaders in closed session at the United Nations in New York. Over to Mike Rice at the UN Plaza. Are you there Mike?"

Bradley had not been assigned to the alien beat. He was far too junior to qualify for such a plum assignment. In his several years since moving from the provinces to Fleet Street he had carved out his niche on the industrial front, specializing in human interest sidebars to strike stories.

It was, in fact, his day off, that Saturday afternoon when he sighted the alien. He and Alison, his fiancée, had been picking out their china pattern at the John Lewis department store in the great Brent Cross shopping centre when he happened to spot the alien browsing in the carpet department. It was clear where his duty lay. Commandeering a store phone, he called through to his city editor.

Aliens, of course, had been sighted sporadically all over the world these past few weeks: dining in Tokyo, shopping for native art in Manila, inspecting the Soviet tank battalions in Moscow's Red Square, observing the work of the Toronto sanitation department. But never, so far, had one veered closer to London than Madrid. It seemed almost unbelievable that one could have slipped into the country undetected. And all his!

There was, not surprisingly, an insatiable public interest in the comings and goings of the aliens. Since their meeting with world leaders, the aliens had shown no further interest in politicking. They were, they claimed, here only in a touristic capacity. They wished only to obtain the requisite visas to come and go as they liked, along with a supply of native currencies. In exchange for this they had offered certain philosophical constructs and technological devices. Details of their offerings had not been publicized, but apparently the deal had been satisfactory to all concerned. Since then the aliens had flitted here, there, everywhere.

The alien in the carpet department looked exactly like all the other aliens Bradley had seen on TV. That is, he looked remarkably humanoid, with only his exceptional tallness and thinness – all the aliens were more or less seven feet tall – calling attention to his alien nature.

Abandoning Alison to select the china pattern, Bradley tailed the alien out of the store and into W.H. Smith's. Like all the shops in the centre, it was nearly empty. Half the population of the city were either locked in record traffic jams on the roads to the sea shore on this fine summer day, or else glued to their TV sets watching the tense Third Test unfold not ten miles across the city at Lord's. The alien therefore attracted only the occasional curious stare on account of height. And no one but Bradley seemed to realize that he was indeed an alien.

The alien browsed for some time at the magazine racks, at first flipping through the car magazines, then becoming engrossed in *Playboy*. Bradley wondered whether the alien might not be homesick for his own large-breasted alien wife, back home on Arcturus 3 or wherever it was they were supposed to have derived from. As far as anyone knew, there were no alien women on Earth. Or at least, all the aliens looked the same, and the general assumption was that they

were male, although that assumption could have been quite unfounded. So far none had been publicly forthcoming about their sexual natures, despite several multi-million dollar offers for syndicated rights to such disclosures. Very little, in fact, was known about the aliens.

Finally the alien wended his way out of the shopping centre and into the car park outside. There he joined the queue for the number 113 bus. Bradley, who had been expecting the alien to make use of some more exotic form of transportation, was quite disappointed. Abandoning his own battered Cortina, he joined the queue and followed the alien on to the bus.

The alien climbed to the upper deck and sat down at the front of the bus. Bradley seated himself several feet behind him. The bus jolted its way through the thin traffic. The alien seemed absorbed in the view. Finally, after much stopping and starting, the alien got up and walked past Bradley to the stairs. By the time Bradley had followed him off the bus, the alien was already across the street at the entrance to the Lord's cricket ground.

"I'm sorry," the ticket clerk was saying, as he came into earshot, "all sold out since 8.30 this morning."

Alien watches cricket match. Bradley thought. Too good a story to miss. Much too good. He seized the moment.

"Just a minute," he said, flashing his press credentials. "Do you know who this is?"

A tedious debate followed. The clerk insisted that it was beyond his authority to admit even so distinguished a visitor as the alien. The alien, meanwhile, stood by watching, his expression unreadable. Ultimately the clerk summoned his superior, who summoned his superior. And in this way the alien and the reporter gained entry to the Third Test.

"Thank you," said the alien, as they searched for seats.

It was the first thing Bradley had heard him say. His voice was pleasant, polite and perfectly accentless. Yet it gave Bradley a curious creeping feeling. It was as if the alien had nothing to thank him for at all, that in fact everything had turned out exactly as he had expected, that he had deliberately attracted Bradley's attention in the shop and then dragged him across town to smooth his entry to this match... The idea was both absurd and unpleasant, and Bradley quickly suppressed it.

"You're interested in cricket?" he asked the alien.

"Very much so," said the alien. "You might describe this as the highpoint of our visit."

The Third Test had begun at Lord's on the bleak and chilly morning of Thursday, July 22nd, 198-. Australia had won the toss and elected to bat first. In a virtual carbon copy of the Second Test, they had annihilated the English bowling attack, storming to a first innings total of 511 for eight wickets by tea-time on the second day, at which point they declared their innings closed. By the close of play, England had limped to 55 for the loss of three wickets, with the English Captain Loomis still undefeated with 15 runs.

On Saturday the weather had taken a turn for the better. Lord's was packed out under brilliant sunshine as Loomis and his batting partner came out to face

further batterings and bruising from the Australian attack. With some solid support from the middle of the English batting order, Loomis had mounted a valiant counter-attack. By 3.30 in the afternoon, just three quarters of an hour from the tea interval, England had reached 203 for the loss of five wickets. Loomis was 98 not out, and had been stuck on this score for some twenty minutes, despite the barracking of the crowd, nervously anticipating his first century against Australia.

It was then that a strange buzz began to go up around the ground.

"If there's anything you don't understand," Bradley told the alien, "go ahead and ask."

This was rather a bold offer from a man who had at best only a dim understanding of the intricacies of the game, which he had not played since secondary school and never particularly liked.

"Thank you," said the alien, "but I am quite well acquainted with the game, having made a certain study of it. In some ways, it is much like our own..."

And here he said something utterly indecipherable, untranslatable into Earthly phonetics.

Mumblypobble, Bradley scribbled into his notebook, this being the best approximation he could manage.

"Aha," said the alien. "I see that the Australians are summoning their demon fast bowler Weed back into the attack. We seem to have arrived just in time. I have been most anxious to observe this remarkable player in action. Moreover, it is an interesting tactical move, capitalizing on the undoubted uncertainties of the English batsman Loomis. What an exciting duel of wits!"

Bradley scribbled down this alien prognosis.

"Games," said the alien, becoming unexpectedly voluble, "are in a way the essence of a culture. The externalization of its most deeply held values and beliefs about life, time and existential meaning."

"I see," Bradley said, not quite seeing. "You mean, as in fair play. Not so much how you win but how you play the game, so to speak." He was paraphrasing an old junior school teacher he had always despised.

"Quite so," said the alien. "Quite so."

The alien leaned forward in his seat as Loomis took guard against the Australian bowler.

"And then," the alien said, "it is all so wildly nostalgic."

"Nostalgic?"

The alien waved his hand, in a disconcertingly humanoid gesture. "The feeling," he said, "that we shall never again see quite what we see before us right now. The infinite poignancy of history in the making. That individual, for example, Loomis. Will he ever have a finer moment?"

And then the alien smiled, the first and last smile that Bradley would see on the face of an alien. It was a perfectly pleasant smile. But it was oddly chilling. Because somehow Bradley knew in that moment that the English batsman Loomis would never have a finer moment. Ever, ever again.

Oh, it was perfectly amazing, Loomis thought. Just when for once things seemed to be going well, just when he was on the brink of his first

century ever against Australia, just when he was leading his country back from the bowels of defeat, just when he had mastered his chronic anxieties about the abilities of the Aussie fast bowlers to maim and kill, just when his wife had finally found a plumber to fix the tap....some alien had to come along and screw everything up.

Word of the alien visitation had spread swiftly around the ground. It had been communicated to Loomis by his opposite number, McKinley, the hulking Aussie skipper, who was fielding behind him in the slip position. McKinley seemed delighted at the news. He knew, of course, that Loomis's concentration would be shot all to hell, and that he might not be able to get it back again.

Craning his head, Loomis thought that he could see the alien, a head-and-shoulders taller than anyone else in the stand under the clock.

Loomis had been disappointed in the aliens, deeply disappointed. He had quickly realized that their coming did not signal the end of all things. Indeed, it had the most dreadful banality about it, the dismal tawdriness of some cheap package tour holiday. These aliens, he had thought, must be awfully bored to come all that way to see us.

In his youth Loomis had travelled voraciously, hitch-hiking back and forth across Europe. But travel had palled for him in the end. When you got right down to it, one place was much like another, if not more so.

Boring. The aliens were boring to Loomis, that was all that they were. But there was a very thin line between boredom and terror, a very thin line indeed, and Loomis crossed it once again as he realized that the Aussies were taking advantage of the situation to bring their fast bowler Weed back into the attack.

Weed, looking extremely fresh after a lengthy rest in deep mid-field, rubbed the ball vigorously on his trousers, leaving a long red smear. Then he stared at it, apparently deep in concentration, as if it were a mirror revealing not his own but Loomis's dreadfully maimed face.

No, Loomis told himself, as he watched Weed complete his interminable walk to the beginning of his run-up, almost to the boundary fence. No, I will not get myself out. I will not give that alien the satisfaction....

Jaw set, teeth clenched, heart racing wildly in his chest, he squared off to face the Australian pace bowler, now thundering towards him with the velocity of an express train. Mesmerized, he watched as Weed reached the crease and released the ball from his giant hand. And stood, transfixed, as the ball hurtled into his face.

“A close one,” remarked the alien, as the English batsman seemed to wait until the very last moment to weave out of the way of the oncoming delivery. “Very close. This is a game of surprising violence. And all so very much more vivid in its actuality.”

“Actuality?” echoed Bradley. “You mean, you used to watch it on TV?”

“Hush,” said the alien. “This will be a moment to savour.”

The alien looked on with rapt attention as the Eng-

lish skipper clipped away the next ball, and set off for the runs that would bring him his century.

There was no play on Sunday, the official rest day. Loomis, unbeaten on 171 at the close of play on Saturday – his highest ever Test score, and only two runs short of his highest score in first class cricket – spent a quiet day at home with his family. In the morning he read descriptions of his brilliance in the Sunday papers, relishing the accounts of England's comeback from the jaws of defeat to a possibly match-saving score of 372 for six.

“One of the greatest joys of cricket,” wrote a former England Captain in the Observer, “is to see a competent yet uninspired technician suddenly seem to catch alight, however fleetingly, and achieve a moment of greatness, a moment in the sun. Yesterday we were privileged to see Dick Loomis, a journeyman of considerable skill but hitherto little flair, seize his own moment in the sun, at a time of great adversity for England....”

The former England Captain was a pompous old fart, and Loomis was not particularly entranced with his choice of language: however fleetingly. But the part he kept coming back to was the moment of greatness. Fleeting or not, it was his, and it could never be erased from the records.

The newspapers also contained various speculations about the attendance of the alien at the game, but these accounts alarmed Loomis for some obscure reason and he passed over them quickly, picking up the colour supplements instead.

That afternoon he played with his children. That evening the tap began to drip again. And that night, for the first time in many nights, he approached his wife in a state of high excitement, not entirely sexual. He felt as though, in some mysterious way, he had finally broken through that day, or was at least on the point of breaking through. But he was by no means sure what he had broken through, or where it would lead him....

His wife, in any event, was unresponsive, cautioning him to save his energy for the next day and turning to face the wall.

And so he fell into an uneasy sleep and dreamed an uneasy dream, in which once again he stood at the crease watching the Australian fast bowler race towards him and hurl the bright red ball...only to discover, at the very last moment, that he had left his bat in the dressing room.

There were, Bradley calculated, a total of seventeen aliens in the cricket ground when play recommenced at 11.30 am on Monday morning. More aliens than had ever been seen together in one place, and perhaps all the aliens there were on Earth. Since all of them looked exactly alike to him, Bradley was unable to know for sure which one was his personal alien. But he attached himself to one whom intuition at least told him was his original acquaintance.

They watched in silence, broken only by occasional waves of applause as Loomis, seemingly unaffected by the heavy alien presence in the ground, proceeded to annihilate the Australian bowling attack, playing them at will to all parts of the ground. He was, if

anything, in even better form than on Saturday.

"Extraordinary," said the alien sitting beside Bradley. "Really extraordinary."

"Why," Bradley asked, "are there so many of you here today?"

"You wouldn't expect us to miss this?" the alien asked. "To miss the wonderful aching poignancy of it all."

"Wait a minute," Bradley said, struck by a terrible intuition. "You're not aliens at all. You're time travelers. Isn't that what you are? Come back to see —" he gestured towards the neat green cricket pitch below — "to see a historic Test match. Isn't that right?"

"A historic innings," said the alien. "The conclusion of a historic innings. And we are indeed aliens, by any possible yardstick you could imagine. There is a certain quality of brilliance to your deduction, but I am not really at liberty to discuss it with you. At any rate, I now wish to turn my fullest attention to this most diverting spectacle."

Loomis was in full cry now, and the Australian fielders seemed powerless to restrain him. Just thirty minutes after the start of play, following some of the most brilliant strokes ever witnessed on this or any other cricket ground, Loomis played a glorious hook shot off a short rising ball from Franzetti, connecting with a satisfying thump off the meat of the bat and sending the ball soaring over the heads of the infielders to reach the boundary with a single bounce. The crowd erupted as the scoreboard moved forward Loomis's score to 198.

As if on cue, the seventeen aliens arose from their seats and began to file out of the ground.

"What's the matter?" Bradley asked his seat-mate. "Don't you want to see him get his double century?"

"Statistics are not really the issue," the alien said. "We've seen quite enough, thank you. It has been extremely entertaining, but it really is time to be moving on."

The departure of the aliens naturally caused much discussion among the crowd. The umpires halted play while they waited for the noise to subside. The Australian skipper came back from his fielding position on the boundary to chat with Loomis.

"Aliens," he said, shaking his big shaggy Australian head. "Go figure them."

Loomis, for his part, was gripped by a dull sort of agitation. Something had gone out of him when the aliens left the ground, and he wasn't sure what it was... wasn't even sure that it was due to the aliens leaving. But whatever it was, it left him feeling hollow and deflated. Somehow the whole thing seemed, well, pointless.

Finally, play continued. Loomis promptly played and missed for the first time in his entire innings, watching the ball fly an inch wide of his off-stump. He played forward to the next ball, offering a simple catch off bat and pad that the short leg fielder somehow managed to drop. Then he edged the next ball away for the two runs that brought up his double century.

He was out some minutes later, offering no stroke to a straight but not particularly quick ball from Weed which uprooted his offstump.

The Third Test was drawn, with rain stopping play on the afternoon of the final day.

Loomis went on to lead England to victory in the Fourth Test. Although he scored a half century in each innings, he did not recapture his sparkling form of the Third Test.

Australia won the Fifth Test convincingly to take the series. Loomis was offered the Captaincy of the England team to tour the West Indies that winter, but he declined, citing pressure of work in his management consulting business.

The aliens, after their visit to the Lord's cricket ground, were not seen again.

The Financial Times Index rose, then slid some more. The oil-workers' strike ended, but a gas utility strike began.

Bradley married Alison, but they separated a year later. She took the china, which he had never liked.

Loomis did not play for England again. At the end of the next season he retired from first class cricket at an unusually early age. His water heater broke and had to be replaced. His son Billy broke his arm playing football.

Things continued.

Andrew Weiner is a graduate of Sussex University and the LSE. He now lives in Canada and works as a freelance journalist. His first SF story appeared in *Ellison's Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972), and since then he has sold four stories to *The Magazine of F & SF* as well as appearing in several original anthologies. He has also published criticism of rock music and movies.

Continued from p.2

to your friends and colleagues, to booksellers and libraries. Independent publishing is a difficult endeavour; all the odds of the distribution system are stacked against us. Hence our first aim must be survival and consolidation. If you are not already a subscriber please become one, and encourage others to do likewise.

Because we once again have a lot of excellent fiction (including one story by a completely new writer) to cram into this issue, as well as Tom Disch's moving poetic tribute to the late Philip K. Dick, we are not able to introduce a letter column as yet. Please continue sending us your comments, however, as we shall certainly include a selection of readers' letters in our third issue. Magazines and books are very different entities: as we stated last time, a magazine is a growing organism, it draws nourishment from the earth around it — which is another way of saying that you, the readers, can participate. You are free to put a bit of yourselves into the magazine, and thereby to help its growth.

David Pringle

ANGEL BABY

RACHEL POLLACK

The angel came at me in the IBM parking lot, the huge double football field of concrete behind the long grey factory. Like I did every day in summer I'd gone there to pick up my mother's car. Every afternoon she would drive to work, and an hour or two later, after I'd cleaned up my dinner, I could go get the car and visit my friends or go to the shopping centres or the movies. At a quarter to twelve Mrs Jacobi, who lived across the street and worked a couple of departments down from my mother, would take Mom home, telling the same old pumpkin jokes year after year. My mother could have gone to work with Mrs Jacobi too, and saved me the twenty minute walk to the parking lot down by the river, but my mother claimed Mrs Jacobi sometimes came late and it made her nervous that her work record should depend on someone else.

The angel came over the river, away from the mountains. I remember thinking, crazylike, that it must have come from one of the Catskill hotels, one of the resorts where rich people went to get away from the city....

I saw the eyes first. I don't know how, but I did. You'd think I'd see the wings before anything, but no, I looked up, I don't know why, it wasn't like anything called me or anything, I just looked up with the car keys in my hand, and I saw — they looked like small shiny bits of metal floating towards me. I stared at them. I didn't feel faint or nauseous, just weird, like my skin or something was sliding off into those horrible cold eyes.

Then I saw the wings. I guess he was coming straight towards me, because I first saw a wavy line of white, dipping down in the centre, then coming up again. I squinted and shook my head, and then he must have shifted, because suddenly the wings filled the whole sky, like a long white cloud pointed at both ends, and narrow in the middle. Very slowly it moved, up and down, up and down. Christ, how slowly those wings beat, they took over my breath, forcing my lungs to open and close so slow that my chest burned. They made me want to cover myself, like I was somehow naked, and not him.

I managed to look around in the parking lot, and I saw, I guess maybe five or six or seven people, walking to their cars and looking tired, like they'd worked overtime and hadn't finished whatever they had to do. A couple were running and checking the big clock over the door, some guy with a big black leather briefcase — And none of them saw. I didn't cry out, I didn't even think of it, my eyes went back to the angel.

The wings looked like they could cover the whole parking lot, like they'd sweep the cars right off the

concrete and just smash the whole row of trees separating the front and back lots. And in between, the legs sticking out, the arms hanging down, his hard naked body.

He was very thin, kind of stretched out, I even thought I could see his ribs. His skin shone. Not much, not as much as the wings. It made me think of the radium watch my father had had when I was a little kid and he let me take it in the closet and shut the door so I could see it glow. The angel's skin shone a lot like that, except it wasn't green but white, like watery milk, so that for a moment I thought of an old movie I'd seen on TV, where they've got this radioactive milk and the scientists are trying to find it and they keep showing it moving around until it ends up on someone's table, pale and glowing. But of course I only thought that for a moment. Later, when I tried to remember his skin, I thought of the way snow looks under a full moon. Even now, I sometimes can't stand to look at snow at night, and I won't even let Jimmy out of the house after dark in winter.

I don't think I realized the angel was coming for me until the last moment. He just came closer and closer, getting larger, and in a funny way *smaller*, as I could see he wasn't really so big, his body no longer, I mean no taller than Bobby Beauhauk, the basketball player who kept breaking things in my bio class. (I wrote "longer" because once my mother took me on a vacation, she said we could both use a rest, but she meant me, and we went to Florida and I saw this alligator lying in the mud, and I started to scream because it was just as long, exactly as long as the angel.) The wings weren't short, they could have stretched over two or three cars easy, but nothing like as long as I thought when I saw them far away.

I never saw — his thing. I know that sounds really crazy, but I just didn't see it. I have some picture of it in my head as bright red and pointy, so maybe I saw it unconsciously or something, but I don't remember anything about it. The thing was, even as I realized he was coming right at me and I should run or something, I went back to looking at his eyes. I felt like I could look inside them, not into his head, but into all the things he'd seen, his own world. I saw it like a place where the sky filled up with lightning all the time, where nothing ever stayed in one piece, where the ground kept melting and turning into water, or even huge fires that jumped up — Except it always stayed cold. Cold like you can't possibly imagine, like no one ever even thought of heat, even knew what it was.

One of the wings knocked me to the ground — I

screamed, afraid I'd hit my head – and then his long fingers started fumbling at my clothes, stiff and clumsy like he didn't know what he was doing. I thought of Mary Tunache, who made out with that exchange student and later told us all he didn't even know how to get her bra off.

He didn't want to knock me over, not like he wanted to force me or anything like that, he just couldn't use his hands very well, our world was too clumsy for him. I know that, because once he'd got my clothes off he just started stroking me, long strokes with his fingers all spread out, like the way my piano teacher used to hold her hands over the keys before she began. At first his fingers seemed horribly cold, and it wasn't until I saw the lines of blood down my breasts and stomach that I realized they weren't fingers at all, but claws, long and thin, a pale gold that picked up reddish highlights from the sun, like my friend Marie's hair that everyone envies so much.

The claws just touched my skin but they reached into me too, and they stirred up something all the way down. I started making noises, they sounded like animal imitations, but they weren't. I was talking his language, his people's talk, not talk but shrieks and whistles that didn't mean anything like our words do, they just said everything they needed to say. Everything.

I wanted to get this right, put it down just like it happened, but I can't. It's not fair. I know what to say, but I don't know the words. Whatever I say makes it something else. How can I use human words to describe angel language? If I could only speak that again I wouldn't have to describe.

The funny thing was, nobody heard me, the one or two people I could see in the lot didn't even turn, some woman walked past only an aisle away, in the middle of my screams I could hear the click of her heels. But she didn't hear me, she couldn't even see the angel spread over me, with his wings curving over the tops of the cars.

Reading this it strikes me how crazy it sounds. If no one else saw it, then it didn't happen, right? Well, I think that no matter how crazy a person is, he's got to know, secretly anyway, when he's made something up. Maybe that's what makes them unhappy and violent, because inside they know it's not true, yet outside they can't get away from it.

But the angel was real all the way down, so much that for weeks afterward my mother and my friends looked and sounded fake to me, like people on television saying words that someone else has written and no one cares about.

I don't really know when the angel...entered me. I know he did because later when I checked I wasn't a virgin any more, but I don't remember. It doesn't matter. Can you understand? What really counted was speaking the angel's language.

I don't even know when it ended. Suddenly I was lying alone, between my mother's car and some Cadillac, my body all scratched, as much by the pebbles under me as by the claws, and in the sky I could see the angel, his back and legs incredibly bright, getting larger and larger until they covered the whole sun and sky. And then they were gone.

I grabbed up my clothes, found the car keys on the

ground, and scrambled inside. I lay there on the back seat, still, not excited or frightened or happy or sad, or anything like that. What the angel did, what he shoved me, made me, you can't find any feelings to go with it. I've got a kind of thing about feelings. I think they make up a sort of language we use, just like words, to tell ourselves what's happened to us. They explain things. Happiness says, this was a good experience, you enjoyed it, sadness says, this one was crummy, you didn't like it.

But the angel didn't need any explanations, I'd spoken his language. If I could have I would have given up feelings, and words, forever. But you try to do that without the angel's language and you just become fake.

But that came later. Lying there on the back seat I tried to hold on to what the angel had given me. I tried making those sounds again, only they came out stupid so I stopped right away. I tried to remember the things I'd seen in his eyes and that came a little clearer, except it was only a memory.

One thing real remained. The angel's message. His promise. The angel wanted a child. No, the angel never wanted anything. He was going to have a child. And he'd chosen me as the mother. That's not right either. He didn't choose, didn't find me worthy or anything like that. In the angel's world nothing gets chosen or picked out. You'd think I would wonder why he picked me. But I'd seen that world, I'd talked it, and I knew you didn't need any reason for anything.

I was going to have the angel's child. Except I couldn't do it right away. My human body couldn't hold his angel seed. It wouldn't burn up or anything, the two things just wouldn't fit together. So the first time he came just to prepare me. What he did would change me, not all at once, but slowly, over years until I was ready for him. The only thing I had to do was allow it to work. That meant no husband or lovers, no human disturbing that slow movement all the way through me. Lying there in the car I had to laugh a little. It reminded me of my mother telling me that "virginity still matters. No man wants soiled goods, no matter what he says."

Well, the angel had certainly soiled me, and whatever any man might want I was going to make sure that dirt soiled me all the way down. The angel had promised me a child and I planned to get it.

The strange thing was, I knew that wanting the angel's child already cut me off from him. Wanting things, that's what make us people and not angels. But I couldn't help it.

I lay there for awhile, breathing the hot stuffy air of the car but not wanting to open the windows, watching the sky darken. Finally I heard a couple of men laughing and hid on the floor while I pulled my clothes on. When they'd gone I got up and drove home.

For the next few days I tried, like I said, not to feel anything. I thought it would help me hold on to the angel language. But that was gone. Finished. The angel had dropped me back in the human world and I had to teach myself all over how to work in it. Besides, I could see my mother was getting suspicious.

At first her job and the summer heat kept her so wrapped up she didn't notice anything. I was really

glad of that. I'd spent hours scrubbing the blood stains off my clothes and the back seat of the car. But the next evening, when I called my mother after she'd driven to work, she just went on about the heat and the men in her department wanting a young secretary with big tits instead of someone who could type and cared about her work, and how I shouldn't forget to water the lawn before it got dark.

For a few days it went like that, but then she started to ask did I feel okay, why didn't I go visit my friends or go to a movie, get away from the heat. I didn't say anything, just made a face and moved away when she tried to touch me. One day she told me of a dance the Lutheran Center was giving at Speckled Lake, and all my friends were going, why didn't I go, maybe I'd meet someone there, if I sat at home every night I'd just get depressed—

I could see her watching me closely, and it took me a minute to realize the test she'd set up. She didn't care about the dance, well, she did, but more, she wanted to see how I'd react to her interfering. Almost too late I shouted, "You called all my friends? Jesus, how could you do that? Didn't I tell you I hate it when you butt in like that?" She had to fight not to smirk as she apologized and went on to say, even so, maybe I should go to the dance anyway, now that the damage was done, no sense in my denying myself—

The funny thing was, she was playing a part just as much as I was. It made me wonder how much she knew. For just a second the crazy idea hit me that an angel (or the angel, maybe there was only one, except it made no difference how many there were, they were all the same) maybe the angel had come to her, to everybody, and everyone kept it hidden, thinking no one would understand, so that if I told the truth, everyone else would want to.

But no, I could see in my mother's face, and later, in other people's faces when I looked at them in the street, she'd never seen those eyes. I could tell by looking at hers. You could go a certain way into them and then they stopped.

Later, after my mother had apologized again, I lay up in my room with the fan on, and thought about my feelings, like anger or sadness, and how they only described things, but how, without the angel talk, I couldn't do anything else. It's all fake, I thought, no matter which way I go. If I acted like other people, that wasn't real, but if I tried not to, if I tried to act like the angel, that made me even more fake. The best I could do, I decided, was act like ordinary people but at least remember the truth. I got up and went to the mirror and looked at my eyes. I thought they looked different than they used to, but how could I tell without seeing them from before at the same time, I thought they went all the way down, but I could only see them in the glass which made everything flat and dull. If only I could really look in my own eyes. The angel can, I thought. He can look at himself from the outside and in at the same time.

The next day I went into town, to Woolworth's, and bought a diary, one of those blue plastic things with thick gold edged paper and a lock on the cover. If I couldn't act like the angel, I thought, I should at least write it all down so I wouldn't forget. I planned to write something every day, all my

thoughts and feelings, even if I had to use human language, so when the angel came back I'd have stayed close to him.

The first couple of days I must have filled up half the book. I imagined ending up with a whole stock of diaries and giving them to the angel or maybe saving them for the baby. But then my daily writing started getting shorter. I found myself trying to think of things to say, or writing about my mother or people I saw or something like that, just to fill up the pages. So I told myself I didn't need to write every day, I would just put things in when they came to me, like if I remembered something about the wings or the claws then I could put it down with the date.

For a few weeks I kept doing it, then I just sort of forgot. I've still got it. I read it recently, while Jimmy was out playing with his toy cars. I thought I'd hate it, thought it would sound stupid. But it said so much, so many beautiful things, almost like some little piece of angel language translated into English. Why didn't I keep doing it, I thought, and began to cry, angry at the same time, because tears, and even anger, had nothing to do with it, they pushed aside the angel voice, leaving nothing but human talk in its place.

Around the time I got the diary I also made the claw. I got some clay (at first I thought of papier maché, but decided I wanted something better and besides, I couldn't remember how to make papier maché) and spent hours bending, twisting, pinching, sometimes screaming and throwing it at the wall (I waited till my mother went to work) because I couldn't get it right.

Finally I told myself I'd never get it right, and settled for a version that didn't try to look just like it, but instead gave me a kind of memory of it. I'd bought a little book on clay which told me how to bake it, and then I painted it, gold with a bit of red glitter, but afterwards I was sorry because the paint took away from the memory. It looked too fake. I thought of using turpentine but decided I'd better leave it alone.

I kept the claw in my drawer, underneath my underwear. Sometimes, sitting in school, or watching television, I imagined the claw inside my clothes, touching me, and I'd get so excited I couldn't stand it. I'd feel like I could burn right through my skin. One time Mrs Becker called on me in English class, to say what some character in Shakespeare said to his mother or something, and I just stammered at her, my mouth half hanging open, while everybody tried not to laugh, whispering things back and forth, until finally Mrs Becker called on Chris Bloom, who always knew everything.

Other times, if my mother or the kids at school were bothering me, I would go home and take out the claw and hold it against me or make it stroke my body, just like his had done, sometimes hard enough to make blood come out. Or else I would just put it next to me while I slept.

My mother kept after me a lot. She wanted me to date more, to go to dances, have lots of boy friends, she wanted all the girls to envy me, and she was scared they pitied me instead. She couldn't stand that.

The funny thing was, I didn't really mind dating. I thought at first that I could never do it again because I had to keep myself clean for the angel, for the baby.

And I thought that all the boys would look so clumsy and stupid and thick, their voices all hard and ugly. I thought any time they'd ask me I'd want to laugh or gag. But then I discovered they didn't touch each other at all, boys and the angel. They had nothing to do with each other, despite my being in the middle, like a kind of bridge connecting them. I saw it almost as two different mes, the one that belonged to the angel, and the one that went to the movies with Billy Glaston or Jeffrey Sterner.

But if I didn't mind dating, I didn't care either. I made no effort, and like my mother told me, the bees'll fly around a pot of warm honey, not a glass of cold water. It wasn't like I dressed sloppy or didn't use makeup, that would have made more trouble than it was worth, it was just that I paid no special attention to what boys said, and didn't try to laugh in a nice way, or give boys any special looks, things like that.

But I got dates anyway, sometimes with boys too ugly or dumb or just clumsy to try for the popular girls, boys who automatically looked for someone in their range. I didn't care. If someone asked me to the movies and I wanted to see the picture I went. I knew I couldn't let any boys do anything with me, so what difference did it make who took me? Only, I avoided the really ugly boys, not for myself, but so people wouldn't make fun of me.

One boy got to me, at least a little. His name was Jim Kinney, though around that time he told everyone to call him James, figuring it sounded more adult or intellectual or something. Jim—James—knew more about computers than half of IBM. In fact, when he was just a junior in high school he got permission to use the big computers down in the factory and wrote some program or other that IBM bought for a huge pile of money. He planned to use some of it, he said, to publish a book of his poetry. Poetry and science, Jim said, were “two horses pulling the same chariot”. He often talked like that. He even showed me some of his poems. He didn't write about nature or love or stuff like that. Jim wrote about truth and knowledge and God, though he said he didn't mean God like in the church.

What he did mean was what got me excited about him. When I read his poems carefully, getting around the fancy words, like “the sheer blank wall of mortal ignorance”, I saw he was writing about the difference between human talk and angel language. He knows, I thought, and got goosepimples, almost like when I could feel the angel claw under my clothes.

But how could an angel visit him? Did they visit boys? The thought upset me the same time it excited me. Maybe a woman angel needed a human man to make her pregnant. Maybe he was also waiting. Out of breath I looked up at him. And saw it wasn't true. He should have been looking at my face, my eyes, testing me the way I would have done him. Instead, he was reading his own poem over my shoulder. “Should I explain it to you?” he said, when he should have waited for me to say something. I could see he really cared about the human words, whatever he pretended.

That day I gave him back his poems and told him I didn't feel well, and ran home. (Later he told me he thought his poems had made me sick, and we both laughed.) But over the next few days I kept thinking about him.

I'm not sure what made Jim interested in me. He wasn't ugly, and he sure wasn't stupid, he could even play sports pretty good, and for a while he had a car, but it broke down. You'd think he could have gotten any girl he wanted, and wouldn't look at someone like me who never made an effort. But maybe the other girls found him too weird, writing poetry and playing tricks with computers. Too smart. Anyway, his car was already gone by the time he started taking me out.

Once Jim and I got started my mother just about bounced off the walls with happiness. Not only was I acting more normal, but I was doing it with someone who had “rich” written all over him.

Myself, I didn't really know why I was doing it. I liked being with Jim, I liked when he called me, when he helped me with my homework, or when we went to the movies (which he called “cinema”), but it still confused me when I thought about the angel. One night Jim and I had gone to a carnival and got home late. I said goodnight to him, and then to my mother (she always waited up for me), and went upstairs laughing at the way some boy had looked so sick coming off the snap-the-whip.

I opened the drawer with my nightgown in it. And then suddenly I started to cry. I'd forgotten the angel. A whole night had gone by and I hadn't thought about him at all. I pushed aside my clothes and grabbed the claw, but then I just threw it down again.

I sat down on the bed and rubbed the tears away, feeling my eye makeup smear. Did I still care? Did I still believe? I opened my diary and stared at the last date. Two years ago. For two whole years I'd had nothing to say. I knew I didn't really stop believing. I couldn't. But I wondered—now that years had gone by, did it still mean anything? Anything more than Jim's poems? Maybe the angel had lied to me and would never come back. Or maybe it had meant what it said, but had forgotten as soon as it left me. Maybe only humans remembered things. How could memory exist in a sky full of fire?

The whole time Jim and I had gone around together I hadn't let him touch me. Well, sometimes we'd hold hands and he'd put an arm around me, but whenever he moved in for something more, even just a kiss, I pushed him away. I had to make up a whole story about how my mother hadn't kissed my father until they were almost engaged, and I really wanted to act different than that but I couldn't help it. I could tell a couple of times Jim was fed up and didn't want to see me any more, but I guess he liked me, or liked having a girlfriend, because he always came back.

But now I thought, if the angel's not coming back, why should I keep so clean for him? I decided the next time Jim tried to kiss me I would let him. The strange thing was, the next night he tried again—we'd gone to the movies and Howard Johnson's, and Jim stopped to show me some craters on the moon on the way home, though we both knew he didn't care about them any more than me—and I still pushed him away. I couldn't make myself do it.

Jim shrugged. “I'm sorry,” he said in a voice that really meant “Screw you”. He started walking away from me but I called him. In fact, I called him in a really strange voice, like I'd taken charge, which

surprised me as much as him. He came back and held my shoulders and for a moment we looked at each other – not for any real reason, I think, but just because people in the movies always look at each other before they kiss. Part of me wanted to stop, to shove him really hard and run away, but I wouldn't let that happen. I made myself stand there, and when his mouth, already half open, came down towards mine I closed my eyes and kissed him.

I never felt such pain in my life. Like some burning knife coming right up my insides all the way to my face. I screamed, and then I did shove him, so hard he fell right on his backside. For a moment he lay there, all bent over, holding his stomach with his face all screwed up and wet with tears of sweat, and I knew the pain had hit him too. He kind of gagged and got to his feet. "You're sick," he said, "you're really, really sick." He had to keep himself from running as he got away from me.

I walked home slowly, making dumb whimpering noises. Inside I became like two people, one of them miserable that Jim had run off and now no one wanted me, and scared because he was right and they'd lock me up screaming in a straitjacket – and the other shaking with joy because the angel was real, the fire had come because his power had worked its way deep inside me and any day now the angel would come back and give me its baby. And I knew, too, that the first me, the unhappy one, was a fake, built up out of years of acting normal to satisfy my mother and the kids and teachers at school. I'd almost let it take over, convince me the real one had never existed. But the angel had saved me.

Graduation came soon after, saving me from my mother as well, and her constant asking what had happened with me and "James". I'd applied to college, mostly because everyone else did, and when the fall came I went off to Albany State. I didn't stay long. The stuff there didn't mean anything more than the stuff in high school. Maybe the other kids got something out of it. But I was waiting for the angel to come back.

I moved down to New York. No reason really. I got a job in the city tax department, sorting forms, making spot checks on people's income tax returns, things like that, and I found an apartment on Queens, one of those streets with six-storey apartment houses where rich people used to live. (My building had a big lobby with even a picture made of tiles on the floor, but the tiles were too faded or broken for me to make it out. The elevator never worked.) And I waited.

Months went by, almost two years really. I'm not sure what I did all that time, how I managed to use up the days. I watched TV, read the paper, sometimes went to people's houses, or movies, or even parties. It didn't make any difference. Now and then one of the men, one of the shy or ugly ones, asked me out, or even made a pass. I never got nasty or aggressive, but none of them ever tried anything again.

Then one weekend I went for a walk in Greenwich Village. I'd taken to walking a lot, all around, though mostly Manhattan. I liked looking at the buildings, sometimes staring up just like a tourist. I liked the way they were so big, so heavy. That day in the village, they were having one of those sidewalk art shows,

with the painters standing alongside trying to look relaxed while they watched everybody passing by. I thought of Jim and his poems.

Then, on Bleecker Street, I came to an exhibit of photos. Most of them showed buildings or people bent over in funny ways, or tricks, like a cat jumping out of someone's chest, but one of them – I almost didn't see it, or maybe I saw it subconsciously, because I walked right past it at first, then stopped just like a hand had grabbed my shoulders and turned me around. The picture wasn't large, 8" by 11" I later found out. It showed nothing by light. Wavy sheets of light with slivers of dark buried inside them.

I just about grabbed the woman standing beside the photos. "That picture," I said. "Did you take that?"

"No," she said, frightened I was going to attack her, or the exhibit. "No, they're all by different people. I'm just taking a turn –"

"How much is it?"

"Fifty dollars."

I checked my wallet though I knew I'd only brought fifteen. "Shit," I said, then I did grab her jacket. "I'm going home to get some more money. Don't sell that picture to anyone else. Do you understand?" She nodded, her mouth hanging open.

I had to meet the person who'd taken the picture, but first I had to get the thing itself. I couldn't stand the idea of someone else buying it. Someone who didn't know. It would have taken too long to go home, but I knew someone who lived pretty close, on East 6th Street. I pushed through the crowds, begging God to make Joan be at home. She was, and loaned me the money. I think she was scared not to.

When I got back the photo was still there, but the woman had put a little sign next to it saying "Sold". I must have scared her too. I gave her the money and stood shifting from one leg to the other while she carefully wrapped it for me.

"Listen," I said to her once I had it in my hand, "the person who took this, where can I find her?"

She looked scared, her eyes moving away from me to see who might help her if I got really crazy. "How do you know it's a woman?" she said.

"Please," I told her. "You've got to help me."

"Well," she said, "I guess it's okay." She gave me a name and an address near Wall St. I nearly knocked over some people looking for a cab. The building turned out to be an old office building reaching some twenty storeys above the dirty luncheonettes and cheap clothing stores. I stood there staring at it, thinking the goddamn woman had lied to me, until I looked in the lobby and saw the doorman sitting on a wooden stool and reading the Post. Then I realized it must be one of those places where they'd converted some of the empty offices into apartments.

The doorman didn't wear a uniform or anything like that, just jeans and a dirty sweater, but he still wouldn't let me up until he'd checked with the woman. I didn't know what I'd do if she didn't answer. I had planned to sit by her door if she wasn't there but the doorman wouldn't let me do that, I knew, and I didn't want to have to stand on the street.

She was there. When the doorman asked who I was I told him "Just say I want to ask about her picture. Her photo." He made a face and repeated it. It seemed like a whole minute before the scratchy voice said to come up.

When I got off the elevator she was already standing in the faded yellow hall, looking a little sick in the fluorescent light. She was tall, much taller than me, with a wide face and straight dull brown hair that didn't help it any. I only noticed these things, and her loose blue cotton dress and white plastic sandals, because it's the kind of thing my mother used to point out. But really I watched the way her hands jumped about looking for a relaxed way to hold themselves, while her eyes, looking very glary behind blue tinted glasses, jumped onto the package I held. "You said photo," she said. "Just one? Which one do you mean? Where did you get it?"

I tore off the wrapping and held it up. Her breath sounded like something jumping down her throat. "Where did you get this?" I said. "Tell me what it is."

She started telling me all sorts of things, about light, and filters, and double exposures, all sorts of things, talking very fast, like she didn't want me to interrupt. But I said nothing, just held the photo, refusing to give it up to her hands that kept clutching at it like she didn't even know they were doing it. And she wouldn't look at me, not for more than a second, except she kept doing that, looking at me, then jumping her eyes away again. And suddenly she stopped all the stuff she was saying, because she knew, and I knew, she could have taken that picture with a snapshot camera, with an old Brownie like the one my mother kept in her bedroom because my father had used it as a kid.

I said, "it's him, isn't it? It's him."

And suddenly she started saying how she shouldn't have sold it, she never meant to sell it, she still kept the negative, she just needed money so bad, she never thought anyone would know.

I don't know who grabbed who first, but somehow we were holding each other and kissing, and couldn't stop, and crying. And the fire didn't hurt, or not so much as that other time, with Jim. It hurt, it hurt her too, she made a kind of choked sound, but it hurt more like lowering yourself into a hot bath where it comes up first around your legs and then your groin and finally your breasts. And then the fire is gone because you've made it all the way in, and it feels so good, so strong, stronger than anything, with the sweat pouring off your face and the steam beating the breath out of you.

Her name was Jo, short for Josephine I thought, but she said no, it was always Jo, and we sort of moved in together, even though we both kept our own places. You'd think I would have worried about us being, you know, both girls, but that never bothered either of us, it was the angel that brought us together, not anything else. When I touched her, her breasts or below, it felt really nice, very soft and warm, but also I saw it as somewhere the angel had touched. Sometimes one of us would make claws with our hands and run it down the other's stomach, but we always stopped that right away, like it embarrassed us. I never showed her the claw I'd made.

The really strange thing was, neither of us ever talked about it. We just kept copies of the photo up in each of our apartments, facing the bed in mine, over the refrigerator in hers because even though she wasn't fat she said the kitchen was her favourite room, and sometimes we'd sit or lie together, staring at it, even

make love after looking at it. But we could never make ourselves talk.

We wanted to. At least I did. Sometimes, usually at breakfast for some reason, like the morning gave me a new start, I would try to think of how to begin, and Jo would also look like she wanted to say something. Then one of us would talk about the weather or the brand of orange juice or someone at work, and that was it for another day. I never even found out when the angel had come to her or where.

Maybe if we could have talked about the angel we would have stayed together longer. I don't know. In everything else we were so different. Jo was very artsy. She did television things, not programs or stories, just pictures of her moving very slowly or even standing completely still, all wrapped up in aluminium foil. She did it herself of course, she'd gotten her own camera, and then she sent tapes to art galleries, where I guess they showed them instead of pictures. And she used to wear those old saggy dresses she got in some filthy shop on St Mark's Place, not just because they were cheap, I offered to give her money for real clothes, but because she liked them.

Her friends were artsy too, doing things like writing stories that made no sense, and they had to publish them themselves on really cheap paper because no regular magazine wanted to buy them. Her friends all thought of me as weird or funny or something, because I worked in an office and didn't wear torn clothes, and they didn't understand how Jo and I had gotten together. But that didn't matter. I knew that Jo didn't care about her "friends" any more than I cared about mine. It was just a game she was playing while she waited for the angel to come back.

For the first few months we were very careful with each other, very polite, except when we looked at the picture or made love. But after a while, we started to fight. About clothes, or where to go to eat, or people we knew, never anything that mattered. Because only the angel mattered. And we didn't talk about that.

So we started fighting, and then making excuses not to see each other, and finally one night I went to her place after work and let myself in with the key, and there over the refrigerator door was a note saying she'd gone to San Francisco for some "video festival" and didn't know when she was coming back. She'd taken the picture.

I got angry. I called up her friends and asked for her address but they said she didn't have one yet and of course she'd send it to me. I got really depressed too, thinking of how to kill myself without any pain. Yet at the same time I knew it didn't matter. I still had my copy of her picture. That's what really counted.

I don't mean my anger or depression were nothing or they went away just like that. As far as I can tell it hit me as hard as anyone else's who'd gotten dumped like that, and it lasted almost longer than the actual time we'd spent together. The thing is, for other people those sorts of feelings are all they've got. But I was waiting for the angel, and anything else just got added on top of that.

The experience with Jo did have one big effect on me. I didn't want to be alone any more. Like when I decided I couldn't give up feelings if I couldn't keep

the angel language, now I knew I wanted people, lovers, at least if the angel wasn't coming back. I didn't forget my promise and keeping myself clean. I just figured that if I didn't really care, if I remembered I was only doing it "until", then it wouldn't change anything.

So I began to date, not just to pass the time or see a movie, but for the person. The first time some guy tried to kiss me, a divorced guy named Bobby, I didn't know what to do. Would the pain hit me? Maybe it went all right with Jo only because the angel had also come to her. But no. Being with Jo had already changed me. I could kiss or let someone touch me – or more, and nothing happened. I mean no pain.

One thing – I made sure not to get pregnant. I used a diaphragm but I also took the pill, secretly, so people wouldn't know I did both and once some guy discovered my pills and he called me sick, like Jim had done, and said I should see a shrink. I told him to go to hell and it was worth any trouble not to get anything of his growing inside me.

Sometimes I wondered, what if the angel came back and the pills made it so I couldn't get pregnant with him either? But I didn't think a bunch of pills could stop the angel.

I didn't really live with anybody, though I sort of went steady a few times, once with another girl, a typist from work named Karen. Karen worried a lot about people at work or her family finding out about us. Once we went away to a hotel for the weekend and she brought along her cousin who lived with a guy, so we could make it look like two normal couples, even registering that way, then sneaking into the right rooms when no one was looking. I didn't really mind, though it bothered me that I had to watch the way I looked at her in restaurants or places like that. I knew how to hide things myself.

One guy even wanted to marry me. His name was Allen and I met him in my cousin Jack's house. He'd spent some years in the navy which was why he'd never gotten married, he said. He liked to show slides of all the countries he'd visited, and sometimes he imitated the funny way the people talked. He said it amazed him how many languages there were. Without thinking I said, "They're all just human languages." He looked at me funny and asked what I meant. I told him nothing.

When Allen said we should get married I didn't know what to do. I really liked him a lot, he was the only person I knew who enjoyed walking around the city as much as me, he could even show me things I'd missed. And I was sick of my crummy apartment.

But I didn't know what marriage would mean. Did it count in some way that dating and sex didn't? Allen wanted to get married in a church. His brother Michael was a minister and Allen liked to joke about Mike needing the business. Would that mean more than marriage by a judge? I didn't think so. Marriage was still something two humans did, whatever the church said. Why should the angel care about marriage any more than he cared about two people riding the subway together? Nothing humans did meant anything. Or maybe the other way around. Everything humans did had to mean something because humans couldn't stand it otherwise. Only the angel did things that

didn't mean something else, something explained in words or feelings.

Still, when Allen insisted I give him an answer I said no. He got really angry, said I had to tell him why. Give him a reason. I told him I didn't have one and that was the truth. Refusing to marry Allen was the closest I ever came to angel talk, because after I'd gone through everything in my mind, I ended up saying no, for no reason at all.

Of course Allen didn't understand that. He'd go back and forth between begging me and screaming at me, sometimes calling me up late at night and just about biting through the phone. He got my mother on his side and the two of them went after me so much I sometimes thought of going out to San Francisco like Jo and leaving a note on the refrigerator. Later, when I got pregnant, Allen figured I'd said no because I was already screwing someone else, and he sent letters to everyone calling me a prostitute in about six or seven languages. "Prostitute" was the one word he'd learned in all the countries he'd visited.

The angel came one Saturday morning when I couldn't sleep. Sometimes I wonder, if I'd stayed in bed would the angel have broken through the window, or would he have flown right past the house, and I'd never have seen him again. But the rash had stopped me from sleeping, and maybe the angel made the rash in some way.

The thing was, the night before the angel came, I'd spotted some funny red bumps all over my stomach and backside. They didn't itch, but I still spread Caladryl all over, and I guess I didn't wait long enough for it to dry because the sheets got all sticky. That, and thinking about Allen, woke me really early. When I couldn't get back to sleep I decided to go for a walk. It was late May and sunny, very pretty with all the trees full of leaves, especially a few blocks away where the houses got much fancier, with regular lawns, almost like Long Island.

That's where the angel came for me, right in front of a grey brick split level with a Cadillac in the driveway and probably another one in the garage. Maybe the angel liked Cadillacs. I didn't see it coming at all this time. I was looking at some flowers with really pretty colours and little coloured rocks spread all through them.

Suddenly I turned – maybe I heard the wings – and saw him, almost right up against me, his blank eyes, the huge wings, one of them almost brushing the house's picture window. His mouth hung open, really wide, but I didn't hear anything. I didn't see any teeth, only a long tongue that kept flicking back and forth. Then he pushed me to the ground.

I had trouble getting off my clothes. I was only wearing a light jacket, but his claws kept getting in the way until I almost shouted at him to let me do it. Then I lay back, trying to stare in his eyes, see his world again, while I waited for his claws to stroke me, for my voice to explode in his sounds, his perfect language.

Instead, he just shoved himself at me, pushing me into the wet dirt, his wings thumping the lawn and the street, his tongue slapping my cheek, my neck, my forehead, burning the skin. I wanted to scream, or cry, or beg, but I couldn't. I wouldn't. If he wouldn't let me

speak angel language, I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of hearing anything human coming out of me.

At the same time I thought, it's my fault, I betrayed him. I ruined myself. I became too human. But now, I wonder, maybe it just happened that way and would have been the same if I'd never gone with Allen or Jo or anyone.

I didn't watch him leave. I just lay there on the ground, curled up and hitting the grass with my fist. Finally, I got scared someone would see me, naked and crazy like that, and lock me up. I got my clothes and ran home.

Five times the next week I almost tore up the picture, the one Jo had left. Ten times in the next month I almost tried to call Jo herself and ask if the angel had come back to her too. I ended up doing nothing. What difference could any of it make now that the angel had come back and shut me out?

When I found out I was pregnant I didn't know what to do. I almost went to get an abortion. I didn't know if I could, if whatever they did would work any better than the pills had. I was wild. I walked up and down the streets in midtown, waving my arms in a pouring rain and stopping every now and then to make a noise like a roar or a shriek. I couldn't figure out if I was afraid or angry or thrilled, but all the choices sounded pretty rotten, all of them feelings, talk. I wanted to see the angel world and all I could see was my goddamn belly getting bigger and bigger.

One thing I knew. I didn't want any doctor to deliver the baby. I wanted to do it myself. I'd never even seen a baby being born, outside of the movies they showed the girls in high school, and of course they only showed ordinary babies. This one I didn't even know how long it would take, the regular nine months, or ten, or six, or what. But I just decided if the angel was using a human woman then probably it wouldn't run that different from a regular birth. And I didn't want any doctors near me.

So I read books and took courses and did exercises, and when I figured the time was getting close I rented a house by a lake – it was someone's summer house but they had it insulated for winter too – and stocked it with lots of food and any medicine I could get without a prescription. Then I set everything up – I'd gotten some books on midwifing so I knew pretty much what I needed. And I waited.

It was horrible. The pain filled the whole room, it rolled off the walls at me, it went on for hours and hours so that I thought the kid must have braced itself inside and would never come out. I was scared I was going to die. The angel was killing me because I'd betrayed it. If only I could phone a hospital, tell them I needed a caesarean. But I'd torn out the wires in case I'd get scared and want an ambulance, and now, when I really needed one, I couldn't call anywhere. I won-

dered if I could somehow drive my car, at least down to the snowmobile centre down the road. But when I tried to walk I couldn't even get out of bed.

It went on for so long I started seeing things. I imagined myself outside, with snow all around, and the angel circling way over my head.

When the baby did come out it came so quickly I didn't know it had happened. I went on pushing, with the kid lying there on the soaking wet sheets. When I realized I'd done it I lay back, shaking so much the whole bed made this awful squeaking noise. Probably it had squeaked like that for hours, and I was cursing and crying so much I never noticed. I picked up the kid and cut the cord and cleaned him off as best as I could. I had to get rid of the afterbirth and get him breathing and everything, and I knew I better do it all at once, because if I stopped I'd just fall asleep. At last I held him up so I could look at him.

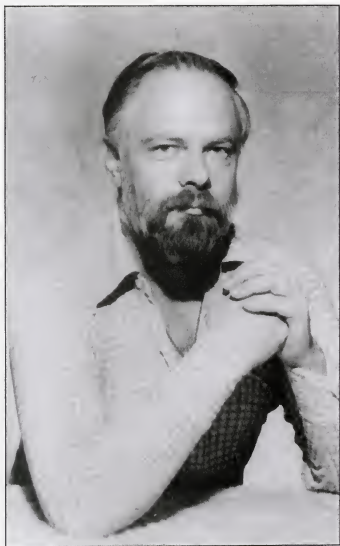
A haze or something must have covered my eyes because it took awhile before I could actually see him, what he really looked like. When I did see I just stared at him. Wings grew on his back, small, dirty white, not feathers but sort of rough, almost like cheap leather, the kind you get on pocketbooks bought at one of those downtown discount stores. For the first time I realized the angel's wings were like that, leather and not feathers at all. Even while I stared at him his sad little wings fluttered a couple of times and then came right off. They fell on my leg. I screamed and knocked them onto the floor. When I looked for them a couple of days later they were gone. Crumbled right into dust, maybe.

His hands did the same thing. I don't mean they fell off, but they changed, from claws to ordinary baby hands, the hard curved claw fingers shrinking to stubby human ones.

There's nothing left, I thought. All that pain for nothing. But I was wrong. He had his father's eyes, cold, very hard, and empty. Even now you can see it, not all the time, but sometimes he'll put down his truck or his cap gun, or else he'll just stand there when some other kid throws the ball to him. Then you can see that metal coldness take over his eyes, and you know he's looking right past you, into a world of lightning, and fire that jumps into the sky, a world where the sounds say everything, and not just words.

He's going to find it hard, much harder than I ever did. I only saw it, only spoke to it once. But he's got to look at that world all the time. And live in this one.

Rachel Pollack is American, but has lived in Amsterdam for a number of years, lecturing and reading Tarot cards when not writing. Her stories have appeared in various magazines since the first was published in *New Worlds Quarterly* in 1971. She has published one novel, *Golden Vanity* (1980); a second, *The Country of the Dead*, is forthcoming.



This way he dies unreconciled, and we are left
 With his books buzzing on our stained-pine shelves,
 Their sting and sweetness frozen by the flashcube
 Of his timely exit. *Finis*, he wrote, then wadded
 Up the paper and swallowed it – though literally
 That is exactly what he did not do. A suicide
 Only by omission: he forgot to take the pill
 His heart required, informing God, if He exists,
 That He would have to keep it ticking by Himself.

CANTATA '82

An Ode to the Death of Philip Dick

by Tom Disch

God, if there is a God, and that is something
 He could never decide, has thrown him away.
 A dumb thing to do, you say? With so much juice
 Still to be squeezed, with all that doom could do
 To force new bloom from the pollardings
 Of late middle age? He might have suffered much more.
 Or he might, let us admit it, have got himself
 A golden tan under the sunlamps of success,
 Written his memoirs, and made friends with Leviathan.

I scarcely knew the man and have no right
 To trim his obsequys with my romances.
 There will be flowers from the studio that did
 Its level best to level his best book
 (But with, it should be understood, his blessing);
 A special wreath, perhaps, from Harrison Ford,
 Who (I'm told) he thought had meant to murder him:
 Hollywood's latest, greatest star his murderer!
 Lord, he had no need of my romancings!

And yet I'm sure he would have wanted them,
 For he loved, as much as any five-year-old, to hear
 His story told – how little Philip all alone,
 Set off along the darkling road and won the love
 Of Linda Ronstadt, or would have if she'd known
 Him as we knew him, who loved him and still do,
 Though only in the useless way we love
 The newly dead. No, don't fret. Your story
 Isn't over. We won't turn the lights off, yet.

What other things did Philip do? Were there
Giants that he slew? Dungeons where in chains
He languished? Were there witches and enchanters?
Did he dance on California's golden lawns?
Did his words assault the mighty, like the words
Of John the Baptist in Strauss's *Salome*?
There were. He did. But his words of prophecy,
Alas, were drowned by braying brasses,
Unheard by all our Herods and Herodias.

Yet, as every poet knows, melodies are
Sweeter so. They are the honey ravens bring
To feast the poet in the desert of his heart –
Might-have-beens, imaginings, false starts.
For a while their wings will hover overhead:
Then, still unperceived, depart. Art,
In a word: art as the uniter of lobe
To lobe, of sic to non, of hick to city
Slicker; art as our reason for being writers.

Well, Philip, have I said it yet? The bitter,
Insufficient truth? I love you. It's not a love
To ease your feet from the concrete shoes
Of your completed oeuvre, nor yet a love
To warm your flesh or even earn you
Royalties. But let me say, for all your fans,
I love you, and I know that you'll return,
Our *divo* *redivivus*, each time your voice
Is summoned from the earth to tell its tale.

– Tom Disch
Easter Sunday 1982

· IN REVIEW ·

Helliconia Spring by Brian Aldiss (Cape, £6.95)

After all his experiments and excursions out of the genre in the last twenty years, Aldiss returns to allay any doubt that he is still the grand master of British science fiction. *Helliconia Spring* is the first volume of a trilogy which will actually deserve the term "epic", chronicling the comings and goings of civilisation on a planet whose year is twenty-six Earth centuries long. Sharing *Helliconia* in a state of hostile misunderstanding are the aboriginal phagors, a race of horned bipeds Aldiss calls "ahuman", and the tribal descendants of human colonists who barely survive the ice age of winter as nomadic hunters, but come into their own as the planet approaches the giant sun Freyr and the climate warms up. This first volume follows human history from the wanderings of Yuli, a young eskimo, through the settlement he

finds at Oldorando, which develops agriculture and eventually trade and science. Meanwhile a great phagor army is slowly crossing the continent to stand poised to attack Oldorando which, as the book ends, is on the brink of some kind of renaissance. For buried relics and cloudy legends indicate that all this has happened before, last spring, perhaps every spring. In the great tide of publicity which swept *Helliconia Spring* up the best-seller charts within days of publication, perhaps too much was made of the fact that Aldiss consulted several scientists and academics to substantiate the details of his new planet: not the first time a science fiction author has founded imagination on research, after all. What is more important is that Aldiss resisted the temptation to make his book a mere travelogue of the marvels of *Helliconia*, as Silverberg has done to Majipoor, or to simplify it by promoting one character to the status of planetary deity

and superhero, as Herbert has done with Arrakis. The subject and scope of *Heliconia Spring* is the entire planetary ecology, in which one of the most important "characters" is a virus. To maintain suspense and keep a story going over such a huge scale, with so many interests involved, demands all the sympathy and skill that Aldiss commands. Sometimes he cuts a corner or two, sometimes he gets bogged down, but I can't name many other authors who would even have survived the journey. (FRL)

The Divine Invasion by Philip K. Dick (Corgi, £1.50)

There is, of course, no consolation for the shocking and unnecessary death of Philip K. Dick. Even so, as the last of his works to be published in his lifetime, *The Divine Invasion* becomes a worthy last testament. Readers who felt that Dick's own special brand of ontological paranoia had gone astray in the theological catacombs of *Valis* will be reassured and delighted by this book, which continues his compulsive detection of God in a world of fickle and atrocious realities, but shifts that quest back to familiar Dickian ground. It starts with the brilliant and startling device of making God one of the questing characters, in His second incarnation as Emmanuel Rommey-Asher, a young boy traumatised from birth. His mother, Rybys Rommey, a space colonist dying of multiple sclerosis, finding herself pregnant though still virgin, had returned to Earth with her companion Herb Asher. Sensing the threat she carried in her womb, the authorities tried to stop her at Immigration Control. She and Asher got away in a robot taxi which was involved in a highly suspicious accident minutes later. Rommey dies, but her child was saved. Ten years later, amnesiac from the crash, the boy Emmanuel begins to investigate His own identity with the help of Zina, a young schoolfriend who seems to know far more than she should. Or is all this a hallucinatory dream of Herb Asher's as he lies in cryogenic suspension, alternating between erotic dreams of the singing superstar Linda Fox and interference from the FM transmitter next door which broadcasts non-stop all-string selections from *Fiddler on the Roof* and *South Pacific*? The unstable landscapes and flexible histories, the autonomous dreams and illusory environments, the wilful automata and masked humans are those of the very best of Dick's earlier fiction, but here they come

together with the personal urgency of *A Scanner Darkly* and *Valis*, the desperate search for meaning and reassurance in, as we now know, extremis. The result is a vivid, funny, awesome, zippy book charged with the full power of Dick's fatal genius. (CG)

Little, Big by John Crowley (Gollancz £8.95 & £5.95)

As with *Engine Summer* (1979), the title of John Crowley's latest novel tells the reader more than the reviewer probably should. Everything in *Little, Big* clusters harmoniously around the relationship between the two terms. At one level, we are reading an elaborately serene family chronicle set somewhere in upstate New York from 1900 to the end of the millennium, the story of Smoky Barnable's love for Daily Alice Drinkwater, their marriage, their children, their long lives together as America continues to disintegrate beyond their huge pacific retreat filled with relatives and protected from motorway incursions and the other incursions of human progress by fairies and elves. But the great house Smoke and Daily Alice inhabit is a pentagram whose intersecting rooms and corridors and facades enact the Renaissance Art of Memory; the further one penetrates the house — at whose heart is an orrery turned by the universe — the closer one comes to the hugeness of the mystery *Little, Big* concerns itself with most profoundly. Except for Smoky, everyone in the novel is related to one another, and everyone is convinced that they are living through a Tale of great significance. The Tale is everywhere in *Little, Big*, which itself must be penetrated like Edgewood, the great house; indeed, with its echoes and depths and repetitions, *Little, Big*, after a fashion which transcends paraphrase, is the Tale. As the century ends, a Parliament of Fairies sums up the Tale; the domain of faerie, attainable by entry through doors that seem small but lead within to the Bigness of epiphanic significance, has been opening itself throughout the novel, for those capable of stepping within, and the family chronicle of the Drinkwaters turns out to be a dance inwards to the heart of the maze where everything means. How life in New York at Old Law Farm, a certain television serial, the rebirth of Frederik Barbarossa, a gun club, a park shaped like the Art of Memory, an obsessive love affair between Auberon and Titania, and certain other narrative elements all contribute to the meaning of the title, the reader will joy in discovering. (JC)

Little, Big

is an
enchanted —

and enchanted ...funny ...mysterious ...sensual ...unforgettable novel by

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